

INFANTRY OFFICER

A Personal Record

Illustrated by Photographs

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BATSFORD BOOKS



1 May 10th, 1940: German Tanks crossing the Belgian Frontier

TO
ANDREW JAMES STUART

PUBLISHERS' NOTE

The author of this book passed out of Sandhurst two months before the outbreak of war. He went to France as a subaltern in one of the first battalions of the B.E.F. to land there, fought in Belgium and Flanders and was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry during the retreat to Dunkirk. After a campaign in Africa and a period in Commandos, he is now training as a Glider Pilot.

He has never written before. The book was completed during a week's leave from notes made at the time, and few alterations have been made in the text except for some condensation and a few "literals."

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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I

PRELUDE TO BATTLE

ABOUT THREE WEEKS after the evacuation from Dunkirk I had a stupid little accident. For a month I had had a pretty intensive experience of modern warfare, and had got away scotfree. Now that it was over, I had to trip over a small stone. My knee gave, and two days later I found myself in a hospital cot, waiting to have a cartilage removed.

This was a relief, and gave me a chance to rest my mind and tidy it up a bit. I felt the need to sort out the impressions of the last year dispassionately; and as I had made brief notes in my diary from time to time, it seemed a good opportunity to expand them into a narrative, if only to get off my chest the reactions and emotions resulting from my first campaign. These, it seemed to me, had changed my outlook completely. I had landed in France a boy; I like to think that I left it a man.

I set to work, but before I had got far my leg was well, and I was on board ship on my way to Africa. Since then my soldiering has been no child's-play: it was nearly two years before I found myself with a fortnight's leave, an easy mind and a desire to put down on paper as much of my experiences as the censor would pass. For various reasons it was not to be much. Of my second campaign I could write nothing; of my first, so much had to be suppressed or modified that it was impossible to produce the kind of record I had intended. So I began again, and sat down to write a story of the French campaign *as I saw it*. The incidents in it are all incidents which happened, and my reactions to them are those which I felt at the time. Sometimes, perhaps, my feelings have run away with me, so that I have over-dramatised seemingly unimportant events; and sometimes the sequence of events may have become distorted, because one incident followed

another naturally in my mind, if not in fact. Where that has occurred, my answer is that what I have written is not intended to be the history of a regiment or of a campaign. It is simply an account of the reactions of an individual to the experience of battle.

I think that there were three main reasons why I joined the Army. The first was that I had been connected with it all my life. The second was that it involved travel—and seeing the world free of charge seemed the best way of seeing the world if you had no money. The third, and the most important, was the job itself. I loved the idea of dealing with men rather than with machines—leading, helping, encouraging men, not from a desk behind closed doors where employees are just numbers, but in fellowship with those men, knowing their names, their troubles, their interests and all the other small details which make a number into a human being.

When I left school at sixteen my parents were in Hong Kong. I was worried about my future and couldn't decide on a career. I tried a little farming, but that seemed too much hard work for too little return—so I left it to others worthier than myself. I tried the sea in a small way, working before the mast in a trawler for a time, and later as steward, cabin-boy, deck-hand, first officer and general runaround for a whisky-runner in Cornwall. It was great fun, but extremely insecure. As I grew older my chances of getting into Sandhurst seemed to fade. I had done little or no work at books for some time, and there was a stiff exam. to be passed before the R.M.C. would accept me. Then a letter came from my father. He is a soldier, but he can write a pretty good letter; and the one I received from China woke me up and set me thinking. I began working at my books again in earnest. The day before I was to sit for the Sandhurst exam. I won £20 on Fet in the Cæsarewitch. I took that to be a good omen. It was.

After several years of playing the fool on my own, Sandhurst came as a shock to me. My first parade was under the

company sergeant-major, a massive guardsman, who began by addressing us as follows :

"Gentlemen, I've never set eyes on such a weedy bunch of good-for-nothings in my life. But we'll alter that. Now, when I speak to you I call you sir, see, *sir* ; and when you answer you call me staff, see, *staff*."

There was silence. He roared at us, "Did you hear me ?" and we roared back, "Yes, staff."

Then the regimental sergeant-major appeared, another massive guardsman whom we later called "the Bosom." After looking us over contemptuously, he said : "Now, gentlemen, when you speak to me, or when I address you, you call me sir, see, *sir* ; and I call you sir, see, *sir*." We all roared, "Yes, staff," and got doubled round the square for our trouble.

The first nine weeks seemed endless : drill, cleaning and more drill. We were up each morning at 6.30, and on parade at 7 for drill ; had our breakfast, more drill ; our lunch, more drill ; our tea, then cleaning chin-straps, scabbards, rifles ; then dinner, and more cleaning. There was no dining-out leave until the ninth week, and then only if the senior under-officer was satisfied with our cleaning effort. He had to be able to see the whites of his eyes in our bayonet blades and to comb his hair in the reflections from our scabbards. It took some doing, but few of us failed to pass muster ; and once we had done so, life became enjoyable. We could dine out three times a week ; we were accepted by our seniors as members of the college ; and we wore uniforms, which was enough in itself to make us proud. "Lovely Four," my company, won first the junior drill competition and then the company drill competition. We ended our first term as the champion company, and our senior under-officer got the Sword of Honour.

The Sandhurst term is a long one : there are only three during the eighteen months' course. That first term was never dull. Apart from the novelty of everything, there was the Munich crisis of 1938, and we were not among the least

affected by it. Bookwork was abandoned, and we turned our hands to digging trenches, sandbagging, and finding A.A. guards. For three days we dug up the lawns of the Royal Military College and made trenches among the lovely shrubberies known as "Fisher's Follies." While sweating at a particularly hard piece of ground I remember my company commander walking up and ordering me to get myself a haircut by that time to-morrow. I think I got into more trouble at Sandhurst over my hair than over anything else. Once, in a temper, I had it practically shaved off, and as a result was told by my S.U.O. that it was too short!

After the crisis life reverted to normal—or perhaps not quite to normal. There seemed more punch behind the lectures and the *tempo* seemed a little sharper. In spite of the assurances of politicians there were few of us who did not believe that war would come within two years; and the thought made us take our training seriously.

The average day's work would start at 7 with "shaving parade," which was a five-minute affair under the S.U.O. or orderly sergeant. Juniors and Intermediates had always to attend this, but Seniors only twice a week. It was pretty fair hell for a Junior, as it took him at least a month to learn how to dress at the necessary speed, and an extra-early rise was necessary. However, by the end of your Intermediate term you became so used to throwing on your clothes that you could at a pinch remain in bed until you heard the shout "on parade," and could be fully dressed—boots, puttees, bayonet, rifle and all—in the two minutes that elapsed between the shout and the parade itself.

After breakfast came a P.T. parade, drill, or sometimes a lecture. The first usually consisted in half an hour's sweat, followed by twenty minutes of games. The second was undiluted sweat. The company would be formed up and subjected to the minutest inspection. If anything was out of order you were told: "You've lost your name"—which meant your appearance at the company office at 10.30. Our C.S.M. had his own way of informing us of this.

"Mr. Blank, sir," he would roar, "what's your name, sir?"

"Blank, staff."

"Well, you've lost it, sir."

"Thank you, staff."

"Don't thank me, sir." And the parade would continue. . . .

Drill parade over, we would have a lecture on, perhaps, British military history. The lectures were interesting, and invariably well delivered. They were followed by a period of "private study," during which we went back to our rooms to play cards, sleep, or perhaps do some work on the subject of the lecture. These subjects varied from car maintenance to economics, and modern languages included Pushtu and Hindustani. Military subjects, such as tactics and map-reading, occupied much of the time, with exercises such as equitation—pleasant to some and hell to others. I was lucky in this respect, as I had always lived with horses, and I loved riding. The top riders were provided with first-class chargers, and in most cases instructors who were game for anything from a steeplechase across the heath behind the college to trick-riding and show-jumping in the paddock.

Occasionally equitation came as a trial to all of us. I remember during the first half of my second term how every Wednesday morning we had to parade in service dress and puttees for the first period, which was drill. The second period was P.T.; that meant that we had ten minutes in which to change into our white flannels, red-and-white striped blazers and pillbox hats. The third period was equitation, which meant changing back into khaki, with breeches, leggings and spurs. As a matter of fact there was always time for that, as the second period was followed by half an hour's break. But we cursed at having to spend the time changing instead of at the F.G.S., or fancy goods store—a wonderful establishment kept by a little chap called Alec, where you could buy anything from a cricket-bat to a bar of "Milky Way."

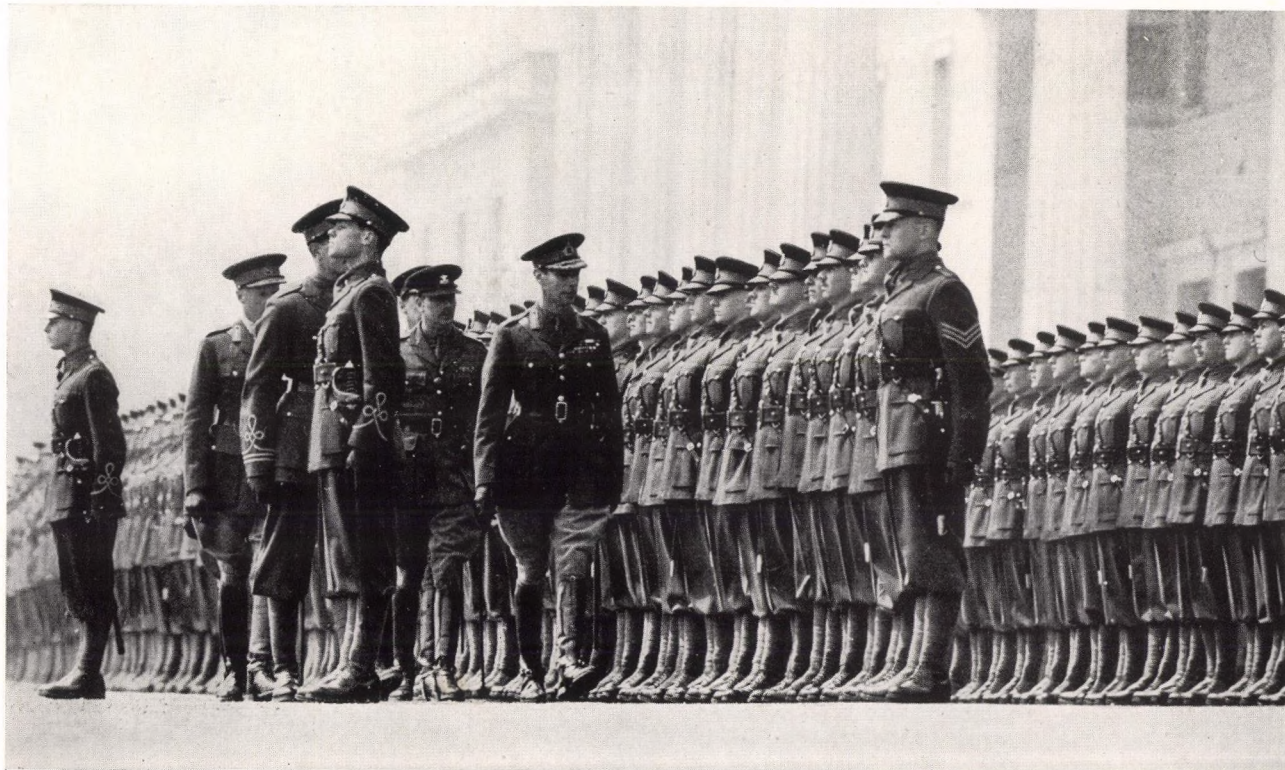
No account of Sandhurst would be complete without mention of the library and the chapel. The former was a classical building, standing alone between the two massive wings of the college. It contained many thousand books, ranging from Edgar Wallace to Plato, and the librarian, an ex-Indian Army colonel, could tell you the shelf-number and something of the contents of each of them. It was always open, and invariably crowded with cadets, few of whom were reading Edgar Wallace. To many people the chapel was an eyesore; to me it was rather lovely. It was more than a chapel; it was a memorial to the Sandhurst men who had died fighting. The interior was large and white and rhythmic. The roof was supported by square marble columns, and on each of these were tablets recording the dead of a different regiment. Every fitting commemorated some past member of the college.

The grounds of Sandhurst are very beautiful, and are dominated by the lake. On Sundays, Harry, my best friend, and I would often spend the afternoon on it in a dinghy hired from "Mrs. Admiral," the boat-keeper, from whom, at the right time of year, you could buy strawberries and cream. The lake also played its part in the dances which occurred about once a month; it was considered the thing to row around it for an hour or so with your partner, whatever the temperature. The dances were great fun. The chief occasion of the year was the June Ball, for which large marquees were erected and a dance-floor laid down among the trees, which were festooned with coloured lights; and the islands of the lake were softly illuminated.

Other great occasions were the Sports, and the "Shop" cricket-match. But perhaps my most vivid memory of Sandhurst is of a battalion parade before the King. Imagine 600 cadets, buttons and brasses shining in the sun, lined up along the length of the parade-ground in file, the scarlet-clad college band behind them on the steps of the Old Buildings. Under-officers, their swords glittering, stand to the fore; the adjutant, mounted on a charger, faces the parade. The



2 Sandhurst



3 Sandhurst : an Inspection by H.M. the King

edge of the parade-ground is lined with spectators—soldiers and civilians ; in the near distance is the lake, fringed with trees. The King advances slowly down the straight white drive between the spectators ; slightly ahead of him, on either hand, march cadet stick-orderlies wearing broad white cross-belts and swinging silver-mounted canes. Suddenly the adjutant rises in his stirrups and, throwing back his head, roars to us to slope arms. Six hundred men move as one : *crash-two-three, crash-two-three*—than the swift, silent third movement as the right hand cuts away to the side. The King has reached the saluting-base ; the stick-orderlies, twenty yards apart, move on a few paces and come to a halt with almost mechanical synchronisation. Then : “Batt-al-ion, Roy-al Sal-ute ! Pres-enttt *Arms !*” Moving again as one, each right arm crashes against the butt of the rifle, and the rifle is swung in front of the body, bayonets sparkling like diamonds in the sun. A crash as the right foot is raised and smashed behind the heel of the left ; then the deep roll of drums, and the first soft notes, rising in a crescendo, of the National Anthem.

Half-way through my last term the course of events decided the authorities to speed up our training and rush us to our units as soon as possible. I will never forget our passing-out parade—my last experience of the glitter and *panache* of a peace-time army. The Seniors were lined up along the parade-ground ; the colours flapped gently in the breeze. Then, to the roll of drums, we moved off in file at slow time, like a long caterpillar, towards the steps leading up to the main entrance. The head of the column mounted the steps, and, file by file, we disappeared into the interior. As I passed through the door I realised almost tearfully that Sandhurst was over and that I had become a man, with a man-sized job ahead of me. Suddenly I felt rather happy.

For the last time Harry, the two Johns, Jerry, Philip, Lionel, Bill and I went to the F.G.S. for cups of coffee. We sat and talked cheerfully for a few minutes ; then rushed off to change and be away, shouting good-byes. They were

good-byes, too. The Japs hold Jerry ; Lionel, Philip, and one of the Johns were killed in France.

I was given a month's leave before joining my unit : a month of uniform-fitting, advice and excitement. The day came, and at ten in the morning I left home in my old car, piled high with baggage—proud, and also rather frightened.

I arrived at my unit in the afternoon. Someone very kindly gave me tea in the mess and showed me my room. Then he suggested that I should watch the band beating retreat. During the ceremony, at which the band marches up and down the square playing, I was introduced to some of the subalterns.

"I take it all this is rather strange to you," one of them said sympathetically.

"Oh no," I replied. "I've often seen this sort of thing before."

"Then you should know better than to come to a regimental ceremony without a cap," was the answer. If there had been a hole in the ground I would willingly have fallen into it.

The next day the new subalterns—there were three of us—were introduced to the Colonel, who made us a short speech. The gist of it was that if we were keen and worked hard we'd get on ; if we didn't we'd get out. We were given the rest of the day off to fit ourselves out with the odds and ends we'd forgotten, and to get our hair cut to the approved length. Hair again ! Ever since I've been in the Army I've fallen foul of the authorities over my hair. A few days later the C.O. threatened to bring the regimental barber into the orderly room and make him cut it in public. Fortunately I was spared that indignity at the last moment.

It was summer weather, and for me one happy day after another. We would often spend the whole day out of doors on schemes, attacking hills, capturing woods, always advancing and always in the open, roasted by the sun. We generally got back in time to change our clothes and rush off



4 Sandhurst: Tactical Instruction



5 Sandhurst: The "F.G.S."



6 The "Phoney War": British Troops in France

to the local swimming-pool, where we would spend the rest of the evening, half naked, drinking "Pimm's No. 1" and diving and splashing in the warm water.

Occasionally a bunch of us would spend an evening in London. This was the exception rather than the rule, as none of us had much money. When it did occur we usually made a night of it, which was excusable, since our nights-out were few and far between.

The Army in peace-time is by no means all play and no work; if anything it's the opposite. There was always a great deal to do. Before I had been in the battalion a week I was sent on a course. It was one devised by the regiment with the idea of training us to do things in the regimental style and not merely as we had been taught to do them at Sandhurst. At first I found this rather beneath my dignity and felt that I already knew what I was being taught. I discovered my mistake when we were set the final test-paper—and I failed. The rocket I received from the C.O. kept me quiet for some time.

There wasn't much time for following the news, and so our calm was badly shattered when we were told one night to hold ourselves in readiness for any eventuality. Then came the order to report to our respective company officers and get our Bren magazines filled—one round of tracer to every plain round. Then buses arrived—and we discovered that we were going to London. Some weeks before, the C.O. and his company commanders had been to London to establish M.G. positions for the low-flying defence of the capital. Now we were off to man them.

The next morning we set off. I drove my little car and headed the procession of buses. When we reached London we split up, each making for his own post. We spent the day getting our guns into position; no one paid much attention to us—we might have been putting up washing-lines for all the stir we caused. That night I had dinner with a high official of the building on the roof of which I had a post of four Brens. He was very interested, but failed to see what

good we could do if an attack developed. "The swine will fly in at about 20,000 feet, drop their wares unaimed and then scurry home," he said. How right he proved to be!

The day before Hitler attacked the Poles we were recalled to the depot. We returned, not to our barracks, which were being used for the reception of reservists, but to billets in the district. We discovered that the Army was mobilising quietly and efficiently, with no outward sign of hurry but with a deadly earnestness that frightened us a little.

At 11 a.m. on September 3rd we assembled in the mess to hear Chamberlain's speech. When we learnt that England was at war with Germany there was no particular excitement or even noticeable enthusiasm. I think we all felt rather determined, that's all. That there was a job of work to be done, and that the sooner it was over and done with the better, was, I believe, the general reaction.

Outwardly there were no particular signs of hurry; we were still in billets, and life went on much as before—except, of course, for the black-out. On the second day of the war we had our first "alert." It was at about 7 a.m., and the ack-ack guns banged away for all they were worth—but nothing happened. A few days later Jerry and I stowed the colours. The next evening we were told that we could have twenty-four hours' embarkation leave. Things began to look interesting. I took my leave and said good-bye to my people. I think my father was rather jealous that I was leaving before him.

The battalion assembled at about 7 in the evening. Even then we didn't know for certain where we were going. "Gentlemen, to-night you leave this country for an unknown destination. Later I hope to be able to tell you where it is, but at the moment I don't know myself," the C.O. told us. At one o'clock in the morning we marched to the station, which was about a mile away. Complete silence was ordered, and this was maintained until we reached the end of the drive, where the guard had turned out. There, one of the sentries shouted to a friend: "Keep your — nob down, Tug, and

knock the Liebfraumilch out of the b——s.” At that the tension broke, and the men began shouting cracks at the guard as they passed, such as “Look after my Old Dutch till I get back, Slogger, but don’t get funny with her. She packs the hell of a right!” Someone started singing, and soon the whole battalion was roaring “Auld Lang Syne” and “South of the Border.” Even at that hour in the morning people came to their windows to cheer us.

We entrained, and by 3 a.m. were on our way. We arrived at Southampton at about 11, boarded our boat and settled down to a long wait. We were sailing in convoy, we were told, and would have to stand by until the other ships were ready. As there had been a hitch in loading one of them, this might be a long time.

Eventually we got going. As we steamed up the Solent and out to sea we were so crowded that I and some others had to sit in one of the lifeboats. One of the men had a “squeeze-box”; he played some of the old tunes and we sang. I think we were all a bit awed by the thought of the future; the younger men were happy and full of enthusiasm, but the older ones—men who had seen service in the last war and realised what war entailed—were quiet and a little grim.

We spent most of that night playing pontoon; I remember winning 5s. 4d. Each of us had to take an hour’s turn as duty officer, and that was no easy job. It entailed walking all over the ship, visiting each mess-deck in turn; but as the ship was loaded to overflowing, and every inch of deck-space was filled with sleeping soldiers, it was at moments almost impossible. To add to the trouble, the ship was rolling like the devil, so that it was difficult to get from one end of a deck to another without waking some of the sleepers.

We reached Cherbourg at dawn and were at once disembarked. Quite a crowd turned out to watch our arrival, and we got a cordial reception. But we had no time to see the place as we were put straight on to a train, in which we set off up-country almost immediately.

That train was as cold as only an unheated continental train can be, and as slow as a hearse. However, we were not overcrowded and managed to make ourselves fairly comfortable. I had a small stove and made tea, and we were able to buy bottles of beer and wine at the frequent stops—though it often required some effort to make ourselves understood, one major, whose French had failed him, hopefully reverting to Hindustani.

We landed up at Brest, where we were given a wonderful welcome. We marched from the station with drums playing, everyone "putting his back into it." The whole town turned out and we were cheered from end to end of the tree-fringed route.

Our billets were in an old brewery on a hill above the town; to reach it one had to make one's way through a particularly noisome quarter. The accommodation was by no means ideal and the smell of dried hops and yeast was almost overpowering. But the men took the place in good part, and there were very few cases of "rough-housing" between them and the French sailors with whom they shared it.

My own billet was in an hotel, and very pleasant it was. It seemed strange at the time, having crossed the Channel to fight the Hun, to be living in comparative luxury, sleeping in a bed and having a cup of tea brought me in the morning. The French were fighting in the Saar, and we had all expected to be sent up to help them. As it was, our only task was to guard the docks and assist other units to disembark. This lasted a couple of weeks; then we were sent up to the Belgian frontier.

We left Brest with mixed feelings. We did not know where we were going at the time, but we had a fair idea that it was in the direction of Germany. Some of us had a slight "blind" the night before we left, and got into trouble with an R.E. major for singing doubtful songs in the bar of the "Continental." We were rescued by a colonel in the cavalry, who was also leaving for the front the following day.

We entrained the next morning at six, and steamed out half an hour later.

There's little to be said about the months of "phoney war" which preceded the German invasion. So much of the time was spent in digging or drinking that there was little left for training. During those eight months I don't think I took part in one field exercise, though I did construct a railway-station yard, build a road and turn a stream into an anti-tank obstacle. No, I'm wrong; not a complete obstacle. When it was half finished we left it to build the road. Again I'm wrong; we half finished the road and left it to construct the railway yard. That we did finish, but a late frost almost immediately undid our work. You shouldn't make railway yards of asphalt when there's frost about.

The people of Northern France hated the Boche; but our reception was not, on the whole, cordial. One day, for instance, a Hun aircraft came over on its usual reconnaissance beat. A piece of ack-ack shell fell through the roof of a small farmhouse, making a hole about two inches square in the tiles but otherwise causing no damage. I went along to ask the old woman of the house if we could mend it for her. All the thanks I got was a hysterical tirade on England's responsibility for the war and a pewter mug hurled at my head.

There was another side to the picture, of course; and sometimes we were almost embarrassed by the unselfishness of our welcome. One of my first billets was the house of a small wine-merchant in a hamlet south-east of Lille. That family had seen more of war than most front-line soldiers. The grandfather could clearly remember and describe the Franco-Prussian War. He, the mother and her two daughters had lived there through the 1914-18 campaign, and their home had belonged in turn to France, to no-man's-land, to Germany and to France again. We found them cheerfully preparing to face the ordeal for a third time. But they welcomed me as a son and made their home mine.

One of the daughters was a woman of about thirty ; she had prematurely white hair and an old face. She told me the story of her "death," as she used to call it. The Germans had overrun the district quite early in the last war, and two officers—second-line supply-column men—were billeted on the family for two years. This daughter was about six at the time. One evening the German officers strode into the parlour and demanded food. They were told that there was none, so they grabbed the little girl, hauled her into the kitchen and sat her in the washing-boiler. They told her that they were going to cook her and eat her. Food was eventually produced from somewhere and the child was released. After that, whenever the Germans were dissatisfied with their food or their wine, they repeated the performance. The white hair and haggard face of that woman were a reminder of their visit.

The other daughter had a little girl of six, with a sweet face and lovely hair. She used to call me "Daddy"—her one word of English. I heard later that the village was almost wiped off the map by Stukas ; they had spotted a British ambulance convoy moving through it. I don't want to revisit that place.

Another pleasant billet was the house of the mayor of a village north-west of Arras. He was a grand old boy who had been a professor at the National School of Fencing. Every evening for two months, wet or fine, he used to fence with me in his garden. I had played around with the foil and *épée* at Sandhurst, and had usually managed to slash my way to victory ; but in the first week of that course I received the greatest thrashing of my life. During that week he taught me nothing : we just used to fight for half an hour each evening. At the end of it he asked me if I wanted to learn fencing. I looked down at my torso, bruised, dented and bleeding, and replied that I did. At the end of the second week I was so stiff that I could hardly walk ; but as time passed I found myself growing fitter, stronger and quicker of eye than I would have thought possible.

Archie (my company commander) and I had a disappointment here. The mayor had told us proudly that he owned a bathroom. As it was the first bathroom of which we had heard in that part of France, we were rather pleased. We asked to see it. Madame opened the door, and there, sure enough, was a clean, tiled room containing a new, white bath. But we never used it. The bath was filled with carpets and furniture, and the room stacked high with all kinds of junk, including a plough!

The weather was incredibly cold during most of our stay there. The men lived in barns and stables and slept on straw which was never more than two inches thick. They only received three blankets apiece, and as the buildings were full of holes were swept by icy draughts. They had to wash in water drawn the night before in large tubs, with the result that there was never less than an inch, and sometimes two inches, of ice on it in the morning.

Our work did little to keep us warm, either. We were widening a stream, which entailed standing in water most of the day. One day of pouring rain and bitter cold most of us had stripped to our pants to keep our clothes dry. As I stood in the stream in gumboots and pants, Archie and the C.O. arrived with the divisional commander. I tried to hide, but Archie shouted for me. I met the General looking more like a drowned puppy than a platoon commander.

Christmas 1939 was one of the most miserable days I can remember. Archie had gone on leave, and I was left holding the baby. At the time we were living in a farm ten miles from the rest of the battalion; I had a filthy cold which was bordering on 'flu; the company was happily getting drunk at the one "local." I tied a cracker to the door-handle and pulled it; the door-handle won, receiving a tin whistle and a paper hat. I stole both, and played softly to myself on the whistle. For refreshment I polished off a magnum of *Cordon Rouge* which I had bought a few days before for fifty francs.

That is how most of us spent those months of "phoney

war," with little or no distraction. It has never surprised me that the French troops were in bad fettle when the blow was struck. The Frenchman lacked the phlegm of our soldier; to be so near home, and at the same time so far away, seemed senseless to him. The Hun was wise in aiming his propaganda mainly at the French—and very effective it was. Leaflets were dropped on us many times; our fellows just laughed at them. But the French took them seriously, which was bad, and what the Hun had expected.

Even at that time we had our spy scares and our spies. In one week our Intelligence Section caught three of them, all prostitutes, and sent them to the French Army—I suppose to be shot. The Hun used to get hold of prostitutes who had been expelled from brothels, and other unsavoury characters, and persuade them, for quite small sums, to wander round cafés obtaining apparently insignificant information, such as the identity of a regiment or the name of a C.O. This information was reported to a spy centre where it was co-ordinated. The result was probably a quite thorough order of battle of our Army.

Sometimes it was only these small incidents which made life bearable. We were in a strange country talking a strange language, living in intense discomfort and getting little leave. It speaks well for our troops that there was little or no crime—at least so far as I saw. During those eight months in France I don't remember more than one court-martial in my unit.

The men were a delight to serve with. They were nearly all regulars, though many were reservists—men who had done their seven or twelve years' colour service and then gone into "civvie street," to be recalled on the outbreak of war. As a result of the excellent system of industrial training introduced into the Army some years ago, many of them were skilled artisans; for instance, my platoon included two first-class aircraft fitter-mechanics, a post-office linesman and a tradesman carpenter. Possibly some of them would have been more useful to the war effort if they had remained at

their benches; but the Regular Army is responsible for fighting a war until the Civilian Army can be trained and mobilised, so they had left their shops and returned to their old profession of soldiering.

It must have come as a shock to some of them to go straight from "civvie street" to the front line, with no intermediate period of preparation; but they took it like men, in good heart and with a ready laugh. The majority were Cockneys, and a Cockney can laugh at a bomb that is screaming down to obliterate him—at least that's what I found. However cold, however bored, however frightened, the Londoner can always find an answer in a bawdy joke or a dig at his mate. I've heard two such fellows, during a frightful bombardment, arguing hammer-and-tongs over the theme that "Number 16 'fuss and bother' bloody *does* go to Charing Cross 'frog and toad'!"

They had one drawback: they never stopped writing letters. They wrote two, three, sometimes four a day, and the wretched officer was supposed to read through and censor the lot before they could be posted. One fellow used to write only once a day, but that letter ran to anything from six to ten pages.

Another difficult but rather wonderful habit was "protecting" you. A couple, usually slightly intoxicated, would approach you deferentially, and, shyly at first, begin "taking you in hand," that is, telling you that they would see to it that no trouble came your way from shot, shell or "grabbing" Frenchmen. One of my sergeants regularly insisted on telling me my fate if we had to "go over the top" (in those days we still thought subconsciously in terms of trench warfare). He would inform me that my job ended as soon as I had blown my whistle and waved my arm; from that moment I must remain in the background—in fact, if I tried to lead the men over the top I would receive a clout on the head to keep me in the trench, "begging your pardon, sir." This used rather to annoy me, as in one of my most frequent boyhood dreams I had pictured myself standing on a parapet,

sword in hand, bullets flying past my ears as I encouraged my men into battle. . . .

Two months later, lying in my hospital cot after Dunkirk, the events and mentality of that period of "phoney war" seemed very far away. Out of the window were green fields and hedges; birds were singing, and the sleepy smell of pine-trees filtered into the room. A contrast to the hell of the previous month; but only a week before we had joined battle with the Hun, our surroundings had been little different. The sun had shone on the peaceful face of France, the birds had sung in the trees, the fields had been almost as green. One day had been very like the next; we regularly did and saw the same things. That was what our systems had expected of us, and that was what our nerves had expected of our bodies. It came to me then that if to-day were 100 per cent. peace and to-morrow 100 per cent. war, our nerves were unprepared to stand the shock. Looking back over my month of fighting I remembered the sudden blow, not physical but mental, which I had received when first subjected to heavy bombing. When it was over my immediate reaction was of intense relief to be alive; but for almost half an hour after that my brain was quite dead. Had I needed to make a quick decision as the last bomb fell, I could not have made sense.

It seemed to me then that a soldier's nerves should be trained for battle as carefully as his brain and body. If during this training he could be introduced to the crash of bombs, the whine of bullets, the whistle and crump of shells, he would find it easier to withstand the real thing when he encountered it. I remembered how I myself after an hour of intensive shelling could tell by the whistle just how near each shell would fall. How much happier I would have been if during my training I had been taught practically that the long-drawn whistle could be ignored, while the short, sharp screech meant a close one. For the first half hour of that shelling I had flattened out at every sound, and the scream of "riccos" had worried me intensely until I had realised

that as long as you can hear them you are safe ; and what you don't hear you don't worry about.

It struck me that such preparation should be part of the training of every soldier. How it was to be done I did not know. I imagined a scheme with soldiers firing live ammunition, with aircraft diving and dropping small dummy bombs that screamed and exploded. I also imagined the faces of the authorities when they heard of the casualties I supposed would result. I was wrong. A year later we were to see the introduction of all those things, and many more, into the training of the soldier.

Another point which worried me was the uniform of our soldiers. Medically, the battle-dress blouse seemed wrong, the cold wind catching the unprotected stomach and kidneys. The hat we wore—the hat we, in polite company, call the forage or “fore-and-aft”—was the hat that the soldier held in ridicule and disgust. He was ashamed of it on his head—he called it a *bat*, prefaced by a short, ugly, contemptuous adjective. Not because of its shape, but because he was ashamed of it. The Guards Brigade wears a peaked cap ; it is proud of that cap, and the Line regiments are jealous of it. No soldier is a good soldier unless he is proud and arrogant—proud of his appearance and arrogant in his bearing. A man can't be dressed up like a dustman and be expected to fight like a knight.

The American and the German Armies have a “walking out” uniform for their soldiers. The Germans wear a small sword or long knife in their belts. They walk out smartly dressed, and armed. Our fellows walk out in battle-dress, unarmed. They look jealously at the other two great services. They look jealously at their officers, who wear “service dress” and a “Sam Brown.” They look jealously even at A.R.P. personnel. If they can put “commando” or the wings of the parachute corps on their shoulders they do so. It gives them back a little of their self-respect.

At home people seemed to have forgotten the war. When

I returned on my first ten-day leave in January I was astonished at the lack of interest in it, and at the frivolous attitude of some people towards it. They seemed to regard it only as a damned good excuse for spending, or as a damned good excuse for a "blind."

With April the *tempo* in France quickened. Hun reconnaissance aircraft, which throughout the winter had paid us only occasional visits, now came over every day; they flew at a great height and were seldom hit. No word came to us to expect trouble. We just continued on our boring way.

II

SUMMER, 1940

THE 10TH OF MAY, 1940, was just like the 9th as far as I could see. I don't recollect any tension in the air, or any dark clouds in the sky. I was going on leave for ten days, which shows how ready we were for the Hun invasion of that evening. To say that we were caught with our pants down would not be a mis-statement.

I travelled in the train to Boulogne with a Scottish major. In the middle of the night, the Hun dropped a bomb near the train; the Scot woke up with a roar and tried to climb out of the window, shouting "Lemme get at that bastard!" I managed to pull him back and explain things to him; he was later killed leading a platoon against a bunch of Hun machine-guns. We got on to the boat at about eight in the morning of the 11th; no one had told us that Germany had invaded the Low Countries. Either they didn't know, or else they didn't care much.

There was a very sweet little Q.A. nurse on board. The sea was pretty calm, the sky pretty blue, the sun pretty warm, the Q.A. just pretty. Our tête-à-tête was interrupted by a shout of "Land ahoy—England, boys!" We rushed to the side, and there was the Isle of Wight. In the very blue sky, an aeroplane was making our way. The quiet of the morning was shattered by the puffy, aching belch of the siren sounding "Action Stations." As the plane drew nearer it turned out to be an Anson; but the relief was short-lived. It circled once, then flashed out a message on the Aldis lamp. I could read Morse, and shouted out the message as it came over.

"George-Edward-Robert-Monkey-Ack-Nuts-Yorker: Germany invaded Low Countries this morning."

"The —— bastards," came from someone next to me.

"Robert - Edward - Toc - Uncle - Robert - Nuts - Ack - Toc - Orange-Nuts-Charlie-Eddy."

"Hell, 'Return at once'!"

"That's a bit of a stinker," I said, trying to cheer myself up. The poor little Q.A. burst into tears. Just then, there was a bit of a scuffle round the rail; some poor devil, with a huge Breton doll under his arm, had tried to jump overboard. He lived in the Isle of Wight, and we were only about half a mile away. No one could blame him at the time: we all felt that we had been stupidly thwarted. "The bloody war will go on for years," we thought. "What the hell difference are a hundred men going to make for ten days?" Thank God, we didn't know how much was to happen in those ten days.

And so we returned to Boulogne, depressed and angry. Our presence confused the issue. No one knew what to do with us, and no one much cared. We were told to wait on for a fortnight, and then something might happen. This news had various effects on us. Some were for hiring taxis and driving, like the French Fifth Army in 1914, to the front. Some welcomed the idea of two weeks in Boulogne. And some, perhaps the majority, didn't know what to think. Half a dozen of us, however, made for Rouen by train, and from there we got another train to Librecourt, the reception camp—in other words, the clearing-house.

We had time enough to dine at Rouen. And what a dinner!—snails, fresh trout, duckling and strawberries and cream. Jerry bombed the town that night—not bits of paper this time, but real live bombs. It was pretty scaring. But you know more about that than I do, most of you, if you have lived in London or Coventry or some other blitzed British city.

At Librecourt, we got very much the same reception. "You *may* get away in a fortnight, but I can't promise anything"—which just wasn't good enough. I simply had to get up to my unit, which I knew to be somewhere in Belgium. It wasn't a case of heroics; it was just that, if

one's got to fight, it's better to fight among friends and your own troops than among strangers. Another point was that, at the reception camp, there were ten soldiers from the battalion, caught like myself, and three of them were vital men—the armourer, the R.A.P. corporal and the mess sergeant. They had to be got up somehow, and I was the one who had to do it.

But it was easier said than done. A plan had to be made, a lot of lies told, and eventually we got the answer. Each corps had a reception camp, and Librecourt was for I Corps. I told the commandant that my regiment was in X Corps, so we were told to go to their reception camp; but instead of going the whole way we popped off at Lens and spent the evening scrounging transport. I sent the men off in pairs to get anything they could lay their hands on. One pair came back with a handcart; gallant fellows, they thought we could put our kit on the cart and walk two hundred miles to Brussels! Another lot found out where they could buy a baker's van for 1,500 francs—but we had no money. Yet another bet was a French ambulance, but that hadn't enough petrol. Finally, we borrowed a 30-cwt. lorry from some A.A. gunners and shot off in that.

Before we left Librecourt, we had fun with some parachutists. Five had been dropped in a large wood near the mines. Parties of soldiers were quickly collected, and we beat the wood. One parachutist was shot by men from a Pioneer Company; we got two, and the F.S.P. got the others. We got ours almost at once, thanks to a gallant old French peasant woman who came with us, to point out exactly where she had seen them drop. They broke cover some fifty yards in front of us and ran across a clearing; we got both before they had gone ten yards. I had a nick filed in my automatic in honour of the occasion. We missed the two later picked up by the F.S.P., though we were at one time only a yard away from them. As we were driving back, we saw a man and a girl, civilians, necking on the roadside. They seemed to be enjoying themselves no end. The F.S.P. brought

them in just after we had passed, so I was told later: both men—both shot.

We left Lens on the morning of the 13th in our borrowed truck, myself driving. I had never driven anything larger than a private car before, and I was in a hurry. The blokes in the back had the hell of a time: one was knocked clean out as we went over a level crossing at 60 m.p.h. I had decided to try for Brussels, as it was the only place-name I knew in that part of Belgium. The trip was uneventful, except for an occasional refugee or smashed-up bomber, until we got to Alost. There the fun started.

The approach along the Tourcoing road to Alost is rather lovely—a long, straight, modern road, none of your French *pavé* stuff, lined with high, straight poplars. About two miles from Alost, we met a long line of refugees. There were thousands of them, some walking, some on push-bikes or horses, and a few in cars: soldiers and civilians. It was noticeable that the majority of the cars were filled with soldiers, and that all the walkers were civilians: I don't remember having seen one soldier using his feet. At the time, I didn't grasp the necessity for this; I only realised later why the troops were in such a hurry—they were going back to France to train: which, of course, with the enemy at the gates of their capital city, was the obvious thing to do! Sergeant Smith, who was sitting beside me in the cab, felt very hurt about it. "The whole goddam Belgian Army seems to be running away, and with it all the other young men of military age," he said. "Look at 'em, kids of twenty, in civvies, running like bloody hell, and here am I, thirty-seven years old, an Englishman, going into their country to defend their ——— homes, while they scam out. It ain't bloody right."

I couldn't help agreeing with him at the time, though later one got to hear just how damn' well some of the Belgians did fight. We wouldn't have minded so much if they had gone back in an orderly line, but they were in such a panic that they blocked the road, and often seemed to take our



7 May 11th, 1940 : British Troops advancing into Belgium ; Belgian Troops and Civilians retreating



8 A Convoy of British Lorries under Bombardment



9 Belgian Horse Artillery, exhausted after heavy fighting, retiring towards Brussels

presence as a personal grievance. But for the most part the people stayed in their homes and were grand. For instance, we stopped at a level-crossing before Alost, and they ran out of their houses and showered cakes and sweet Belgian beer on us, and decorated the truck and ourselves with lilac blossom. The parents asked us to kiss their children, which wasn't much fun, as most of them had very dirty faces.

Alost would have seen the end of our little party but for a lucky meeting. At the cross-roads leading into the town, I stopped to ask a sentry for the Brussels road. He didn't know it, but directed me to his officer who turned out to be a pal of mine from Sandhurst. I asked him to get his cooks to make some tea for my blokes, which he did to my eternal gratitude, for hardly had I got back to fetch the men when along came Jerry in the shape of 150 bi-motor bombers. We jumped into a large bomb crater and the Hun let loose on the town. Alost is only a small place by our standards, and those bombers did a goodish job of work; there wasn't much left standing by the time they'd finished. But for my meeting with Gerry, we would have been just about in the centre of the town when the mess started flying.

I felt by now that I should try to find out where the battalion was, so called on an ack-ack battery near a place called Molheim. They had seen nothing of them, but they had quite a lot to show us—twelve carcasses of enemy aircraft within a half-mile radius of their guns—not bad shooting! The battery commander insisted on feeding myself and my men. We both fared well; for me the mess corporal produced toast piled with scrambled eggs and a large pot of Fortnum and Mason's Stilton cheese, washed down with excellent Belgian beer—bitter-sweet and very mild.

Just as we had finished, a squadron of French motorised cavalry came through the village. We ran out to watch them pass and were in time to see the mother and father of a pile-up. The leading motor-cycle combination ran over a dog and capsized, the three following ones just ran into the first, and for about thirty seconds the village was full of cata-

pulting *poilus*. The Belgian civilians must have thought the Huns were on them, for they ran screaming into their houses, slamming down windows and shutting doors, while the British gunners came out to extricate their allies. The sequel was most unexpected. The French Commander arrived and cursed our gunner major up hill and down dale, God knows why; and in a fury of unreasonable indignation turned his squadron round and went back the way he'd come!

After that we left the place, heading again for Brussels. Passing through one village, I saw an F.S.P. fellow who directed me to a control centre. These centres were in possession of the order of battle of the B.E.F. I walked in, expecting to be shot at any moment by some over-zealous Security bloke, only to find that no one wished me any harm—in fact it was just the opposite. In the office I was greeted as an old friend by someone I'd never seen before, a Captain, who was gnawing at a very large and unripe-looking apple.

"Can I help you, old man?" he asked; and being thirsty I said, "Yes, I'd like firstly an apple and secondly to know where my battalion is."

"But of course, my dear fellow, have one"—and he pushed a large basket into my hand. "Take the lot, there's a bloody great store of them across the road. You want to know where the —s are? Let me see—X Brigade here, Y Division up here—ah yes, here they are, just on this bridge. At least they were last night."

I thanked him and left to give my men the apples; then I came back again, pulled out my pistol and asked him whether he'd like to be shot or to see my pass, one of the two. He apologised most profusely. "I'm awfully sorry, dear boy, thanks for reminding me. I suppose I *should* be more careful. You might have been a German spy, and then I *would* have looked silly, wouldn't I?"

I told him I didn't think he *could* look much sillier, and that, as a result of his bloody idleness, many thousands of British soldiers might have looked much deader.

Another hour's driving found us in Brussels—but the battalion wasn't there. However, we did eventually find them just back from the city, waiting to move up. We were overjoyed to see them again, and I drove up to the orderly room and reported to the adjutant. After that journey I expected some show of enthusiasm by the adjutant; but he displayed none. All he said was, "Why the hell are you wearing that cap. Put your tin hat on."

I reported back to old "Charlie" Company, where Archie greeted me as if he really were pleased to see me and handed me over to Peter, the second-in-command. I was shown my billet—the top room of a large white house, with a wash-basin on the wall. For nine months I had longed for a billet with a bath or a wash-basin, and had longed in vain. Now, almost in the front line, my hopes were realized.

The woman who owned the joint was very fat—and very frightened, poor dear, of "*les avions boches*." The room had a comfortable-looking bed, and, as I hadn't slept for some time, Peter told me to get a few hours then and there: we would probably be moving up pretty soon. I took my boots off, and was just throwing off my coat, when my bat-man, whom I hadn't seen for a month, rushed up to tell me that Archie wanted me. I dressed again, cursing, and we went down to the Company office, which was in the store-room of a gym. Archie was lying on a vaulting-horse, and the other officers and N.C.O.s were already there. Archie looked stern. The room was dark, and everyone seemed rather strained. I felt cold, and little drops of sweat ran down my thighs. Suddenly I got scared, and, God knows why, I felt a great urgency for a woman. Then someone struck a match to light a cigarette; John, my opposite number, gave a little sigh of relief; Archie started to talk; and I found myself laughing quietly.

"The Allied line around Louvain has been pushed back," Archie said. "Things look a bit doubtful. The Dutch have packed up, which means our left flank is in the air. We are moving up into Brussels to-night and are to take up a

position this side of the Willebroeck Canal. The Company dispositions are in accordance with the various bridges. John, you are to hold two main-road bridges here," and Archie pointed to the spot on a large-scale map. "Andrew, you hold this railway bridge over the canal here," and he again put a pencil on the map. "Freddy, you will be in reserve on this bit of high ground, here, ready to counter-attack either of the bridges should they fall. They must not fall. This is vital to the whole Army. They must be held to the last man."

This was our first operational order, and we believed the bit about "last man" then, and were scared.

Orders over, we went back to our platoons to collect the men and see that all the kit was ready. We told the men nothing but to hold themselves in ten-minute readiness. My boys had found a little pub and were drinking the hell of a lot of beer. I was frightened that they might get drunk, but my fears were unwarranted. The local beer, which was very mild, seemed to have absolutely no effect on the chaps, and they had had the good sense to keep to beer and not to touch Anis or Dubonnet. But not the Belgian troops. They were very drunk, and seemed perfectly happy to fight the rest of the war in that pub, while their brothers were dying on the Albert Canal. There was an extraordinary girl in the pub who, to use her own words, "gave her body to the brave British Tommies who were fighting for her land." How much of that was true God knows. But she took three of my blokes into a back room—whether it was for Belgium or for five francs, I didn't ask. . . .

Six-thirty that evening saw us lined up to move off. The whole village turned out to see us go, and the local mayor, a grand old man with a long black beard and flashing eyes, made a little speech which no one understood. Archie spoke to the men, telling them what was expected of us, and we felt proud that we were off to defend Belgium's first city. It was about five miles away; we reached it in good time;

and as we neared the outskirts we saw a huge fire break out near the railway station. The Hun had bombed a fuel storage depot, and it was well alight.

Brussels looked uninviting in the glow of that fire. We had up till then been rather lost, but the fire brought us down to earth. We marched up a broad boulevard, our shadows making grotesque figures against the walls. We tripped and stumbled over telephone wires, rubble, and, now and then, bodies. The road was crowded with troops and civilians, all going in the opposite direction, all making towards France.

At last we reached our bridges. How the hell we found them that night, God knows. No one had been to Brussels before; the map was pretty inaccurate; but we got there.

At once we started to pick out gun pits and dig. We dug all that night, by the light of a watery moon, only to find in the morning that two of the pits were shooting into a bank twenty yards away—so we dug again. Then along came some French sappers to blow my bridge. When they had blown it, we found that all our pits were blinded by or filled with rubble—so we dug some more. My bridge was a big brute, carrying four railway tracks across the road and the canal. The French decided to blow it in two sittings: first the bit over the road and then the bit over the canal. They placed three tons of explosive at the base of the two main supports; when all was set, they found they hadn't enough flex to carry from the firing box to the charge for safety, and they had no igniter safety fuse. A gallant French sapper officer dug a hole in the embankment and fixed it from there, only thirty yards from the bridge: he was written off.

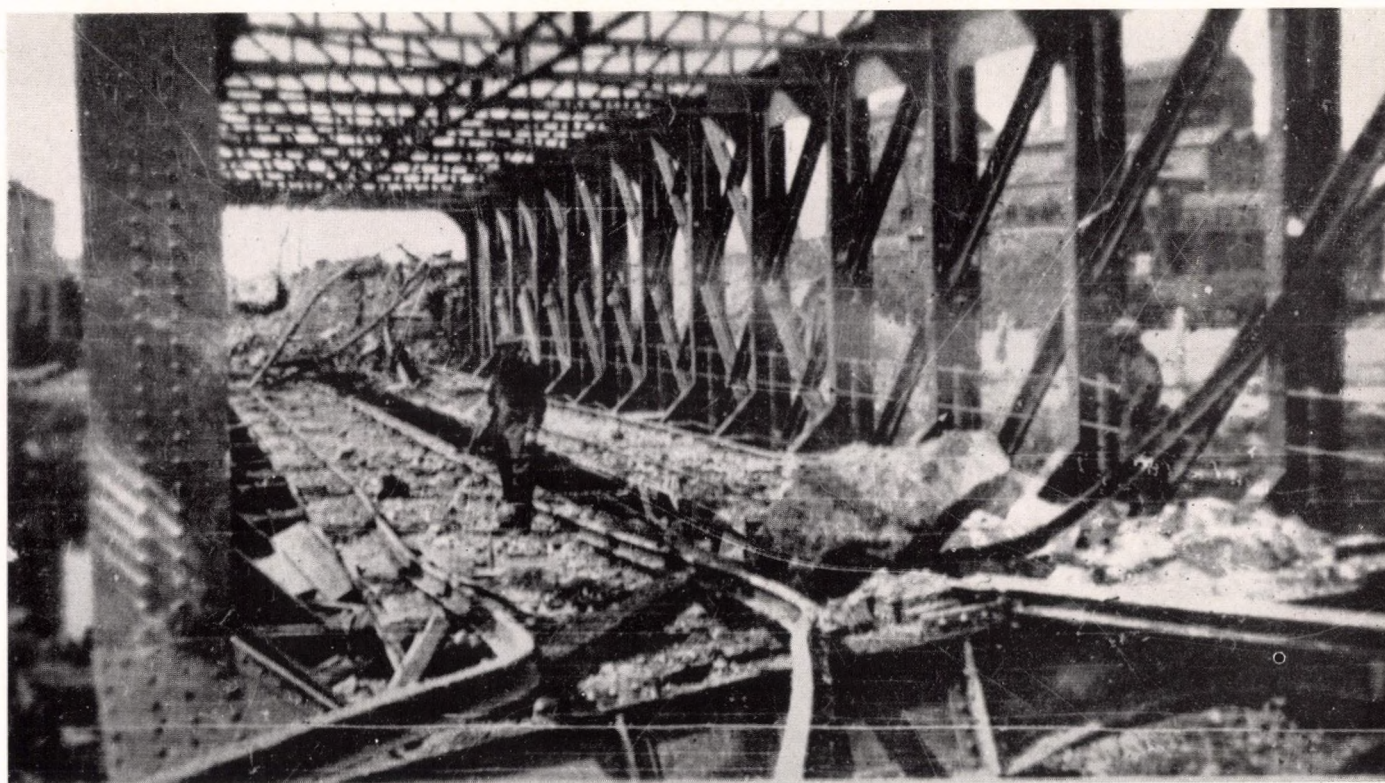
The actual blowing was a wonderful sight. We had to fall back five hundred yards. The bits and pieces fell in an area of a mile; but five hundred yards is safe enough. I watched the blow-off from the top of a hill about three hundred yards back. The bridge was dead in front of me, with the railway lines running away from me, on to and over it. It was a massive affair of steel leaf, and must have weighed

many hundred tons. Suddenly, noiselessly and with no smoke, the lines rose up in front of me. It was no fast movement, but a slow circling back, like the sensuous slow limber of a girl's leg. Then came the crash, thunderous like the crack of doom; the bridge was hidden by a dense cloud of smoke two hundred feet high, and the air filled with the whine and scream of jagged metal. Large lengths of line and huge *pavé* stones plopped down around us, and we saw no more for the need of getting our heads as deep into the earth as the soft soil allowed.

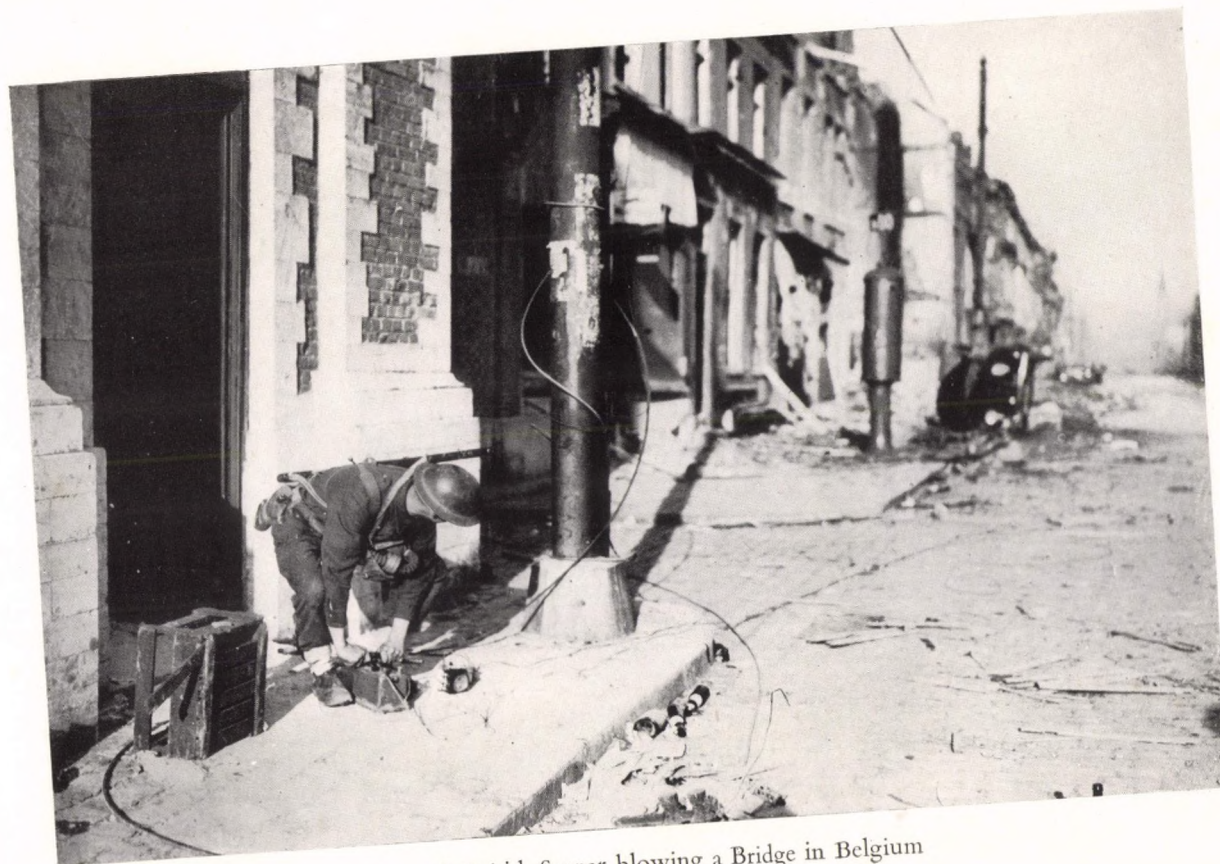
At last all was quiet, and we ran down to see what had happened. The French sapper was dead, but we'd expected that. The extraordinary thing was that the bridge, a hundred feet of it, had been lifted high into the air and had landed plumb on a house ten yards away: the house had naturally collapsed and was now a pile of rubble. That's what had got the sapper.

John's bridge was not such a successful affair as mine had been. British sappers were blowing it, and they had put four tons of amonal in the centre, as it was a single-span, concrete road-bridge. They were then going to place small charges at both ends, but they never got the chance. At about three, a sapper sergeant, who had been talking to Archie and the sapper officer, noticed that the safety fuse was alight. It was too far gone to stop, and we had to run for our lives. We had some troops on the other side of the canal; they had the good sense to run towards Germany, but not the refugees, who ran towards France.

About ten refugees went up with the bridge, including one fellow on a bicycle. I don't know to this day whether I was imagining things, but I could swear that I saw that fellow, forty feet in the air and still peddling, stark naked, a split second after the charge had blown. Then he disappeared in the smoke. We never saw the sergeant again, and it was lucky for the Hun that the sappers didn't get a chance to put the other charges in, for then the bridge would have completely disintegrated. As it was, four tons of explosive



10 Pont-à-Vendin: John's Bridge just after blowing



11 A British Sapper blowing a Bridge in Belgium

knocked about ten feet out of the centre. In fact, in ten minutes we had boards across the gap to get the refugees over.

John had a lucky escape. He wasn't as quick as the rest of us, and was only a hundred yards away when the bridge went up. All the *pavé* stones went over his head, a large glass awning from a door crashed just beside him, and the concussion knocked him head over heels and slid him twenty yards along the road. He cut his belly a bit, but came to no serious harm.

About six that evening, we had our first Hun scare. We were suddenly swamped by a Belgian Guards battalion, which arrived on the far bank in all manner of wheeled vehicles. When they saw the bridges they cursed hell out of us, the colonel asking how we thought they were going to escape if we blew the bridges. Archie suggested that they might forget about trying to escape and try defending Brussels. This made the colonel still more furious. "You English, teach me how to fight a battle! Pah to you, sir, I spit in your eye!"

One of the Belgian privates, hearing the argument, came up to me and, with quite pathetic sincerity, produced a little mother-of-pearl pistol, saying, "I have this. May I stay with you and fight?" I welcomed him, as I felt he would make an excellent interpreter, and would show my men and myself that the Belgians were made of the right stuff. We learned from this fellow that the Hun was about seven miles out from the city and moving fast, so we got ready to fight. But as things turned out, there was to be no fighting for us that day.

That night I took out a small patrol into the centre of Brussels. We wandered around for an hour, but saw no sign of the Hun. However, we did hear what we thought to be tanks on the move, and went back to report—only just in time. During our absence orders had come through to withdraw at midnight and fall back on the Ninove Canal, some twenty miles south-west of the city. We pulled out

as midnight was chimed by the clocks, and started to march for the Ninove Road. It was blocked by a fire, and we had to make a *détour*. Try making a *détour* with a hundred men at your back in a strange city, at one in the morning. You can't keep dodging about as you would if you were alone: you have to turn right and stay right. You can't leave your men at a cross-roads and have a look for yourself: maybe you'd never find them again. A compass was no good: too much wreck lying around for that—metal throws your compass to hell. So we just marched by a mutual sense of direction. After an hour's hard walking, we found ourselves back exactly where we had started. It was two in the morning; we had to be clear of Brussels by then and we were no forwarder than we'd been an hour before. So we had another confab, and set off again. This time we were lucky, but we were very late and all scared. We shook our heels of Brussels just after 3.30 a.m. We seemed to be alone in the world; the city fires raged behind us and the country in front was deserted.

"Christ!" said Archie. "The battalion has scrambled without us."

Thank God, he was wrong; we rounded a corner and there, waiting for us, were the carriers. Alec, commanding them, seemed not in the least worried. We went up to speak to him and, off to our right, some medium machine-guns opened up on us. Very frightening to see, as one can at night, red-hot tracers flashing past your ears! We flopped down quick, and started to reply with our Brens. Alec, still bored, led his carriers round to a flank and began to attack. Then there was a shout of "Cease fire," and Alec, now less bored, raced back to tell us that it wasn't the Hun, but a battalion of the Middlesex. We had mistaken one another for Germans. Luckily, there were only a few casualties, though we lost an excellent company sergeant-major.

At about four we started to march. "Charlie" Company

was rear-guard again, but Alec had a section of carriers as a screen behind us.

There are not many of us who will forget the next three days. We had already spent two nights without sleep, though some of the luckier ones had snatched an hour or two on the first night. Neither Archie nor I had slept so much as five minutes, and I'm sure Peter and John had done no better.

We marched without a break till ten that morning; then we had a half-hour halt, after which we got a ten-minute halt every hour. This was a doubtful advantage, as ten minutes was too short a time for sleep, too short even to allow one to take off one's boots. Sleep was what we all wanted, and that was what some of the men tried to get. It was all but impossible to wake them up when it was time to move off. The result was that the poor bloody officers, who had had less rest than anyone, had to walk up and down the halted line stopping the men from falling asleep.

Heaven appeared at midday—a cup of hot cocoa per man; the cooks had gone ahead and prepared it for us. We passed west of Ninove and halted in the small village of Aspelaere at about three. Here we were told to fall out for an hour, while Archie went off for orders. Foot inspection seemed out of place at that moment, so I hopped into a nearby house and asked the people if they had any water for the men. They came out tops by milking a cow and making us hot coffee that was almost all milk. We had just finished it when we got up again and marched for another hour back the way we'd come. We landed up in a big farmhouse, and were told that we had six hours' rest ahead of us.

At once we ordered foot inspection and foot washing. The men were extraordinary cheerful in spite of large blisters, and very few fell out. After a meal, they got down to kip in a large straw-barn, and I went off to a house that my batman had found for me. The room was on the second floor, and it took some energy to reach it. I got my boots off, lay down on the bed, rose, opened the window and lay down again, at

which point the door opened and in walked my bloke. "Sorry, sir, orders to move at once."

I nearly cried. I don't think I've ever felt more like crying. In fact, I remember asking my batman whether I *was* crying, and if not, why the bloody hell not?

I put on my boots again and went downstairs. How I blessed my old "general" ("general" is a Sandhurst batman), who had oiled those boots daily. I also said a little prayer for the man who had made them. He did a good job of work.

I saw Archie standing in the street. "We're moving up into support of the other two battalions at once," he said. "They are apparently in the *merde* and need us quick. Have your platoon on the road immediately. Battalion assembly area is that orchard over there. O.K.?"

I ran off, got 14 platoon on the road, and we moved into the orchard. It was a big one, and we were able to disperse satisfactorily round the edge. "Charlie" Company was on the front edge, just behind a regiment of 25-pounders.

Over our heads flew an old Lizzie,¹ spotting for the guns. There was a sudden tremendous crash of artillery; they had opened up on a regimental target.² The Lizzie fluttered around like an old hen, correcting the aims and finding new targets for the guns. But the Hun isn't one to allow that sort of thing for long. Out of the sky screamed six Me.109s and pounced on the spotter. The whole battalion shouted at the Lizzie to look out. But she had seen the brutes. And what a show she put up! The Huns formed into line astern about 3,000 feet above her, then peeled off one at a time and, diving, pulled up under her belly and got in a burst. I doubt if even one hit was scored in this first attack, for as each Hun opened up, so the Lizzie dropped her air brakes, throttled back, jinked, and the Hun overshot her. Six times she did this, and six times she got away with it.

¹ Lysander.

² All guns firing by regimental control on one target.

We on the ground watched helplessly, and one soldier burst into tears at the sight.

The Huns returned and changed their tactics. They split up, and all attacked at once from different directions. They should have had her cold but, as they opened up, she climbed, stalled and spun towards our position. The Hun followed her down, thinking she was a goner. She straightened up, pulled out of the spin and raced across the orchard, tipping the tops of the trees. The Huns, not seeing us, followed close after. Just what we had been waiting for! We had nine Brens mounted for A.A., and here were six Huns coming straight at us. There was a rush of officers to the nearest guns. The soldiers manning them were pushed aside and seven of the guns were taken over by seven officers. We held our fire and, just as the first fellow was above the trees, we let him have it. He never saw his fat frau again; he crashed two miles away. The others pulled up and fled for the moment, and the first round went to us.

However, they re-formed at about 3,000 feet, and it looked as if it would be curtains for a lot of us: there was no protection in an orchard of thin-trunked apple-trees. But again we were lucky. From above we heard a new sound, and out of the clouds raced three Hurricanes. They slapped straight into the five Huns who turned tail and fled. The Lizzie was in the air again half an hour later.

We now moved up into position about a thousand yards in front of the guns, and the same distance behind the Blanks. There was a terrific racket in progress. The Blanks seemed to be having the hell of a battle in front, and the guns were dropping their shells on the far bank of the canal at machine-gun rate. Overhead the shells passed us with the noise of express trains. On the far bank we could see the bursts, lighting up the night. We dug in like Trojans all night. "Charlie" Company was in reserve this time.

At this juncture, John and I nearly killed each other over a silly squabble. Our platoons were next to each other, and we both wanted a particular spot for our left and right sections

respectively. Each of us could easily have gone elsewhere but, having found that spot, we were too tired to think about looking for another. We argued like a couple of kids, then pulled out pistols and threatened one another. At last we had the sense to decide by the spin of a coin. I lost.

We finished our pits at about five o'clock, went to sleep and woke up in time for dawn stand-to at half-past five. Hell of a kip that—all of thirty minutes!

At about six, the Hun started some counter-battery work on our guns. He kept shooting short, and sending his stuff too bloody close to us. An hour later, for no apparent reason, we were told to withdraw. Christ! how we cursed! Staying there might have meant death. But withdrawing meant marching—and death was preferable. We withdrew, and we marched. Then we were told that a troop-carrying company awaited us three miles out, and we quickened our pace. But some other battalion had got there first and pinched our vehicles. So we marched some more.

The Hun was about 6,000 yards away, on the other side of the canal still, and we were marching across a hog's-back, in full view of his guns. He let us have it. For an hour he fired at us as we slogged along that road. The dust from the men in front rose up and filled our eyes, noses and ears; our mouths felt as if they were filled with dry horse-dung; every breath shuddered the soles of our feet. The shells were worse. The Hun never quite got our range, but shells fell like rain fifty yards short, fifty yards over. Every near miss meant flopping in the ditch on your belly and filling your guts with more filth. Then came the superhuman effort of getting up again and plodding on. One shell landed on the road behind the signal truck, lifted it high into the air and pepper-potted it a bit. But it stood the strain and carried on. I thanked God I was walking then. On your feet you can hear the whistle of a shell and get down. In a truck you can hear nothing: you can only see the foot-sloggers flatten out and know there's something coming. You can do nothing, just sit and wait. The colonel drove

up and down that road for over an hour, constantly under fire, constantly getting out of his truck and encouraging the men. He helped us a lot.

On the road was an old peasant woman with a cart. She got her ancient horse into a gallop and, screaming her head off, pasted down the road. Just before she got to the end and to safety a shell burst close by, cut the head off her horse and smashed a lump of steel into her back.

We were lucky that day. For an hour Jerry had pumped shells at us, and not one man did he kill. In fact, only two or three were hit, and those not badly.

We went on marching for another twelve miles while gunners in lorries, cavalry in tanks, French and Belgian soldiers in cars, refugees on bicycles, passed us. The number of our men who admitted defeat and rode on our carriers or supply lorries could have been counted on the fingers of a man's hand. The number who marched until they just passed out and fell by the roadside would have just about doubled that.

At last we arrived at a village and there, standing in the sunlight, were trucks, waiting to pick us up. We fell into them and went to sleep. My batman, who is a small man of about thirty-three, refused to board a vehicle till I had found one myself; he was one of the last men in the battalion to climb aboard. I noticed that his boots were wet and asked him if he'd been swimming. "No, sir, only blood." And, sure enough, blood it was: the soles of his feet were lacerated and the blood had oozed through the leather of his boots, but he had carried on.

We travelled miles in those trucks. But it seemed scarcely a minute before we were on our feet again.

We passed a Belgian ginger-bread factory into which some troops had broken. They stood on the roadside with crates of ginger-cakes, throwing a dozen into each passing truck and giving much to the refugees. A soldier gave me a huge piece of cake which I started to eat. Suddenly I realized that the last bit of food that had passed my lips had been

digested by my system two days before. I shouted to the men not to eat too much, as I remembered having read somewhere that too much food on an empty belly had disastrous effects. But nothing so unreal as future pains could stop them from satisfying their present cravings. The effect came about an hour later, when to a man they wanted to relieve their bowels, and very great was the urgency for it.

The lorries dropped us in a tiny village called Belleghem Bosch, west of the Bossuit Canal, and for the first time we felt really safe. X Division was holding the Hun twenty miles in front of us ; and we felt sure that they could cope with him for a day or two. The Blanks were in the same village. I found three or four blokes whom I knew, and we celebrated in the local champagne. Then we slept for about eight hours solid. When I woke I remember feeling worse than I had done for days.

That evening one of our regimental policemen got the shock of his life. When directing traffic at a cross-roads an armoured car came whistling down the road, and he waved it on. Suddenly a burst of machine-gun fire came from it, and bullets spat on the ground at his feet. He took a flying leap on to his Norton, which, by the grace of God, was ticking over at the side of the road, and went off hell for leather, with the armoured car, a Hun, after him, firing for all it was worth. Nortons are good bikes, and the policeman got away, turning up at the battalion a few days later. But the incident shook him and made us walk more warily. What the Hun was doing twenty miles behind the lines, God alone knows.

We had expected to stay in the area to hold a line through which X Division could withdraw ; but on the following afternoon we pulled out in lorries. The funny thing was that, though we had never expected X Division to do anything but withdraw, there was no feeling of defeat or disaster in our minds. I suppose we thought we were going backwards till we met the Gort line, where we would make a serious

stand. Late that day we heard that Arras was in very grave danger, and for the first time we began to feel a sensation of doubt creeping over us. But again, it was only one of uncertainty about the rear, and not a feeling of defeat.

Just before we embussed, fifty bi-motor bombers flew over us, and twelve of them broke formation and dived to seek us out. We were hidden in a wood; I suppose some spy had signalled our position. We kept well down as they circled around looking for us; and, not being able to spot us, they dropped their load into the centre of the wood, killing sparrows and cutting down trees, but otherwise achieving nothing. During the morning, our next-door neighbours had a scrap with some Hun paratroops who had landed the other side of the wood and, at the cost of a very few casualties, slaughtered the lot. But that's their story, not mine.

Having again embussed, we went to sleep, except the poor bloody A.A. sentries; so there is nothing I can tell you about that journey, until I was woken up with a bump in Lille. It was pitch dark and the driver, dead tired, had run into a lamp-post. No damage was done and I asked him where we were. "Rue Nationale, Lille—the Cent-Quarante-Sept is on the right now." 147, rue Nationale was a particularly popular line in brothels!

We had just passed it when I saw a shower of sparks flying from a window high up on the left of the street. I was too tired to register properly, and thought subconsciously that someone had thrown out a cigarette. Ten seconds later there was the hell of an explosion behind—some Fifth Columnist had thrown a bomb at us. There was damn-all we could do about it. If we had stopped to look for him, we would have caused a traffic jam, and probably never have found him into the bargain.

At three the next morning we were dumped in a little village by a canal. The men were told to fall out on the square, sentries were posted and we all went to sleep again. It was impossible to do anything until dawn broke, and the

best way to pass the time was to sleep or eat. But, as we had no food, the answer was sleep.

Dawn found us up and looking round the village. Though we didn't know it at the time, this was to be our home for the next seven days. Here we were to meet the Hun and hit him hard, and here we were first to come up against the phrase "In order to conform with our Allies' plan of defence, we must withdraw to new positions." How many times I've heard that phrase since I don't know. But never have I heard it with such fury as at Pont-à-Vendin.

The village seemed untouched by war when we got there, though it was deserted. It had suffered no bombardment from the land or from the air. The only soldiers, apart from ourselves, were the headquarters staff of an old French Reservist General, who sported a large black beard. He was a Divisional Commander, but he had lost his division! He didn't seem to care very much. In fact, the only thing that worried him at all was ourselves. He hated our intrusion and tried to order Archie out. But Archie stayed.

The village was on the bank of the Canal Haute d'École, which is a tributary of the famous La Bassée. On the far side of the canal were a line of shops, a wood and then open fields, stretching from right to left. My area was the wood, the fields and the road dividing the two. John was on my right; he shared with me a road-bridge across the canal, but had to himself a goods junction, a railway bridge and about a mile of open country. That was for thirty men. Freddy was on my left: he just had fields to look after, about two miles of them. We had nothing in reserve. This meant that "Charlie" company, a hundred men strong and one mortar, was responsible for about four miles of front.

We were told we would have lots of time to dig in, and so we were able to make an excellent job of our posts. While we were digging, I noticed a scruffy-looking French soldier standing on the far bank of the canal watching us. I shouted over to him and asked him who he was. He spat in the

water. He then threw his rifle into the canal and started emptying his ammunition pouches. I shouted to him to stop or I'd shoot him—he spat again. He must have wanted to die an awful lot. I called my platoon sergeant over and told him to load up and aim at the fellow, but not to shoot unless I gave him the tip. At that moment, an extremely pompous major from God knows what unit, bounced up and asked me what the hell I was doing. I told him, and he replied that the fellow was probably browned off and really wasn't doing anything wrong.

The Frenchman continued his game, now shouting foul abuse at us. I winked at the sergeant, and he shot the fellow dead. The major went mad and put the sergeant, myself and anyone else in sight under close arrest. I directed him to Archie and he stormed off. I heard no more about it. In fact, I don't know if he ever saw Archie at all. At that moment Archie was at Battalion H.Q., receiving orders.

That night Peter took over the company, as Archie had to fill the vacancy of second-in-command of the battalion. Peter was a grand chap to work under. He was little more than five feet high, strong as an ox and quite fearless. He had served in the R.F.C. in the last war and, while flying an old F.E.2.B. pusher, had been attacked by three Albatross fighters. He had avoided them for some time until, looking over his shoulder to see his enemy, he had run into the deck and been taken prisoner. He had then made seven attempts to escape, the last time getting within one hundred yards of the Swiss frontier before being recaptured.

Our first consideration was food. We weren't starving exactly, but we were suffering from the next thing to it; and no man could be expected to carry on efficiently when his belly was crying out for something to do, other than rumble. Peter was an old soldier, and knew what to do. He got hold of the Company Quarter Bloke and the Sergeant-Major, and told them that all the officers were asleep, but that they were very hungry. The men were equally blind and hungry, and he, Peter, relied on those two W.O.s to supply a really good

meal for a hundred men. None of that bully-beef and biscuit stuff: what we all needed was a tasty and easily digested meal. Peter and I went off to find a headquarters, while the two W.O.s put their heads together. For the next hour we were deaf to the bird-like screams that shattered the peace of the afternoon, though both of us suffered from a surfeit of saliva, and both were visualising a roast leg of chicken. The next two hours seemed endless: We started to fret and get angry and suspicious that the other might sneak off and get an early issue. Suddenly there was a shout of "Grub-up, boys," followed by cheers and whoops. Peter and I strolled out towards the temporary cookhouse, doing our damndest to appear bored and a little contemptuous of the men for showing such joy at the sight of food; but we couldn't keep it up. There, on clean china plates (we didn't ask where *they* came from), was each man's portion laid out. No wonder they whooped for joy, for on each plate lay half of a roast chicken, two roast potatoes and a generous portion of tinned peas. Peter and I just burst with the joy of it. The next second saw us chatting like schoolboys among the men. Somehow we managed to control ourselves sufficiently to let them get their helpings first, but it took some doing.

John suddenly appeared, slouching along as usual, with a wicked grin on his face. He came up to Peter and told him that he had been lent an 18-gallon cask of beer by the local pub-keeper, who had left for Paris a week before, and that if Peter gave the word he would issue out a mugful per man. Peter of course said "Yes." This was greeted by further demonstrations, but the respectful approval of men who were happy in their leaders—a feeling that fills the heart of any commander of men with extraordinary joy and confidence.

The meal over, we set down to some hard work again. We had to send out patrols across the canal to get news of the Huns and find out the most likely lines of approach. The refugee question was becoming increasingly difficult, and some control would have to be thought out. In spite of our one good meal, the next day had to be considered, and supplies

requisitioned, road blocks set up and mines laid. A lot to do, and not much time to do it.

Freddy was too far away from the village to help us, and he had more than enough to do himself. John dealt with the road block and the food situation, and I coped with the refugees and helped with the food. There was a N.A.A.F.I. canteen in the next town, and John went off to buy some provisions. When he got there, the place was locked and deserted. He got in through a window and found the store just as it had been left a week before, with the goods set out for the next day's sale. He loaded his truck with hams, cigarettes, matches and anything else that was of any use to us, leaving only what was of little use to the Hun.

On the way home his truck was machine-gunned by a Junkers 87 and he had a pretty lucky escape. He jumped out of the vehicle, grabbing a rifle as he went, for, as he put it, "psychological retaliation." As he leaped for the ditch, a burst of fire caught the rifle and cut it in half, leaving him holding the butt.

My part of the racket was to requisition all the food from the little shops of the village. There were only four, and we got no very substantial supplies out of them; but at least we were able to deny the use of what there was to the Hun.

The refugee problem was much more arduous. I went off to see old Blackbeard, the French General, but he refused to have anything to do with either the refugees or the British. The old sod was probably a Hun, though I feel sure no Hun would have supported that non-Aryan growth on the chin.

I tried to find some civic authority, but the mayor had been the first to leave, ten days earlier, and he had been quickly followed by the one policeman and all the male members of the community. In fact, the only beings who seemed to be left were one pretty little woman who owned a pub, which I made my headquarters, one old chemist who was bed-ridden and had been left behind by his family without food or water, and a number of very hungry dogs. So we British soldiers were left to deal with the pathetic and ever-increasing lines

of waifs. Ours was the only bridge for miles around, so we had much more than our share of it. Every person who crossed had to have his or her pass inspected and, if all was in order, had to be set on the right road. This should have been easy; but a good half of them refused to accept our advice the first time, and insisted on wandering around the village before starting off on the right track. An added complication arose after I had pulled a handful of sweets out of my pocket to give to a small child. I was nearly killed by a rush of adults trying to get one. This made me realize that the poor devils were famished, so we set up a food counter and issued out a tin of something and a packet of biscuits to each person. It was pathetic to see their gratitude.

One of my men was literally nearly killed by a bunch of women. We had slaughtered a small calf to replace the R.A.S.C. rations which we never received, and it was hanging up in the local butcher's shop. We had put an armed sentry over it for safety's sake; but some women passing through saw it. They assaulted the shop, knocked the sentry out, and with their bare hands tore that carcase to pieces, cramming the still warm flesh into their faces.

One woman caused us a great deal of trouble. Her small boy pinched a toy from a smashed-up store, and a French *poilu* gave him the hell of a clout over the head. Mama straight away flung herself into a fit of hysterics. I had heard somewhere that the cure for this sort of thing was a good smack in the "kisser," but not so with this bitch. I smacked the hell out of her, but it seemed to make her worse. Suddenly she decided to give the boys a treat, and proceeded to fling her clothes off. Bit by bit she unpeeled, to the accompaniment of shouts of encouragement from some of the troops. The whole thing was rather revolting and pathetic, but we hadn't had much to laugh at during the last few days. When nothing remained but brassière and knickers, I suggested that perhaps honour was now satisfied, and would she please replace her garments? Not a bit of it; with a particularly piercing shriek she ripped away the last shreds of



12 The Refugee Army on a Belgian Road



13 A Casualty



14 The Living . . .



15 . . . and the Dead

decency and stood defiantly stark on the bridge, hoping perhaps to invite the advances of myself or my troops. With her clothes on she had appeared to be a not unattractive platinum blonde. Her clothes off, any foul thoughts vanished from our minds. A soldier rushed at her with an old blanket, wrapped her up in it, and we ran her and her brat out of town.

The refugees became more and more of a nuisance. The Hun was now no distance away and we were expecting to see him at any time. The troops began to hate the thought of bridge and refugee duty as the devil hates holy water. We had many pressing jobs to do, and yet twenty per cent. of our minute force had to deal with the problem of getting those poor wretches out of our area. An added trouble was the arrival of a company of French Moroccans in support of our line. This meant another twenty per cent. on constant duty guarding our stores, hiding what liquor there was in the village, stopping fights and carrying home drunks. Another twenty per cent. had the job of dealing with the barges in the canal. They were particularly large, had been anchored side by side and, in some places, formed a bridge right across the canal. We had to sink them. But we had no gun-cotton and all we could do was to open the sea-cocks. Luckily the centre of the canal was deep and they disappeared from view; but close to the bank the water was shallow, so we had to tow them into mid-stream and sink them there. Again we were in luck, as there were a lot of little electric "donkeys" on one side of the canal, and we harnessed the barges to them. The donkeys also came in very useful for patrolling our side of the bank. They were made of half-inch-thick steel, and so were bullet-proof. They were just large enough for two men: one to drive and another to fire a gun. I also used them as permanent rifle posts.

On the third evening we had our first scrap. It was only a small affair, but it gave us something to think about. At six in the evening, three Hun heavy armoured cars approached the village, down the road which was covered by my left-

hand section. They seemed to have no markings on them, and the section commander thought that they were British. They stopped about ten yards from the canal bank, and two officers got out of the first car. This piece of cheek completely reassured the section and our men climbed from their holes to see what was happening. The Huns walked to the edge of the canal and one of them, in perfect English, shouted to the section commander: "Hi, you b——s, come over here and give us a hand, we've had a bit of trouble." The section commander had replied, "O.K., sir," when one of the men noticed the black cross on the side of the car. "Look out, Joe," he yelled. "They're —— Huns." That section commander was a brave fellow. He repeated, "O.K. sir" to the Huns, turned round slowly, then roared, "Shoot the bastards," and ran for cover. Somehow he got away with it, for the Huns at once opened up. I was at the time in my H.Q. But, hearing the firing, I ran down and was just in time to see the cars turn round and go flat-out back up the road. One Hun had been hit and without doubt killed, for he was practically cut in half by a burst of Bren fired at fifty yards.

As the cars were disappearing round the corner, two hundred yards up the road, the door of the last one opened and a body fell out. I thought it meant that we had killed another and that he had been dumped, but I was wrong. The fellow picked himself up and started running towards us. Before anyone could stop him, a bloody fool soldier fired a couple of rifle shots at him and he collapsed in the road, only to get up again and this time stagger on towards us. As he got closer, it became obvious that he was British. We got him across the canal and found that we had hit him twice in the arm, though luckily no bones were broken. He had an interesting story to tell, of how he had been captured by the Hun at Vimy, where his Scottish battalion had held up a Hun division for two and a half days. He had been prisoner in the cars for three days, and had been treated quite well. He told us that at night the Huns just parked

their cars and, leaving no sentries, went off and slept in houses, usually trying to share the bed of some pretty French girl. I sent him back to Battalion H.Q., and then gave my section commander a lecture on the recognition of enemy vehicles.

That night I took a small patrol across the canal. We went about three miles out, but saw no sign of the Huns.

General Blackbeard's war effort was a nightly patrol, chosen from the clerks and waiters he commanded. They would set out each evening one hour before dark, mounted on bicycles, and would return exactly an hour later. We found out that night what they did, which was to ride gallantly towards Germany till they were out of sight of the village, then dismount, sit by the side of the road and drink and eat from supplies they carried with them in a haversack. Just before it got too dark, and hence too dangerous, to cycle, they remounted and rode back to report. General Blackbeard had informed Archie at the beginning that "*mes enfants galants*" patrolled ceaselessly through the night, ready to kill with the many bombs that they carried in their haversacks.

The next morning a squadron of French Cuirassiers arrived to support us. They were as good as only good French troops can be. They had fought back from Sedan, losing over sixty per cent. *en route*, and yet they were still of good heart and excellent discipline. The officer commanding reported to Peter, and asked if he could be of any assistance. Peter turned him on to the problem of the Moroccans, who were becoming unbearable. Inside two hours he had the whole lot under control and posted in fire pits. He and his men were only with us for a few hours, as he got orders suddenly to move, and we were very sorry to see him go. We had seen so much of the rottenness of France, the selfishness and gutlessness of it all, that it came as a great joy to us to meet the real France again, the France that we had loved and the France that had not—and to this day has not—let herself or her allies down.

The fourth day passed pleasantly enough ; the weather was warm and peaceful. During the late afternoon the order was given to blow the bridge. How we had looked forward, selfishly, to that order ! Once the bridge had gone up, the refugees would have to go elsewhere to cross the canal, and we really felt that we had done enough for them. It was also a relief to know that we no longer need walk about on that bloody bridge with German bombers overhead and three tons of explosive underneath. I was particularly pleased to know that a sapper corporal was present to blow the damn' thing. Had he not appeared, it would have been my job ; and remembering that French sapper in Brussels, I wanted to be as far away as possible.

The bridge blew in a gentlemanly manner, but for one little hitch. I had a tiny camera, and wanted a print of the bridge going up. So I lay down behind a house, about fifty yards from the thing ; and, as it blew, so I flicked the camera and ducked. All would have been well but for one large cobble stone which ricocheted off the wall next to where I was lying and struck me a painful, but glancing, blow on the bottom. The photograph was a failure.

The destruction of the bridge took many worries off our minds. It's not too good a feeling sitting on a very thin line of defence, facing a Tank army, with a bridge running straight into that line.

That afternoon we were bombed rather heavily by six Dorniers, which dived low on to us. It's not so bad when they come low at you ; it gives you a chance to retaliate. We had had quite a lot of the other sort off and on, with Heine flying at about 7,000 feet in huge formations, and all the bombs coming down at you at once. You can see them fall out of the bellies of the brutes, hundreds of them, and they all seem to be coming straight at you, at first terribly slowly, then faster and faster and faster till at last there's just a blackish flash and a scream. We suffered no casualties, but one or two refugees were killed. I ran to see what I could do for them, but they were past human help. This was the

first time I had come within kissing distance of death, and I wasn't happy.

I learnt then that the sight of death and the resultant after-effects are all a matter of attitude and environment. There were four dead: one man, two girls and an old woman. One of the girls was pretty and had been killed by a small piece of splinter in the back of her neck. There was no blood, and her clothes were all in order. She just looked like a dead girl, that's all. The other three must have been mother, father and daughter. The mother had little or no face left, and her clothes were a bit torn, but no part of her body showed. Here I summarised my feeling by "How disgusting." No remorse or bad dreams again—just a filthy taste in the mouth. The other two I will never forget, and even now I sometimes see them at night. They both had most of their clothes blown off them. The girl's breasts and stomach were uncovered, and she was blue-black and puffed from blast. She still had on a black skirt, but it was torn, and her knees were showing with legs wide apart. The man had no trousers or coat, and his shirt was in rags. His face was pulp, and the lower part of his body was a bloody mass. All four of them were dead; with all four death had been sudden and violent and bloody; but only the last two were indecently dead; and it was those two that made me vomit.

I found later that this theory was, in my case anyhow, absolutely sound. It was not violent death that appalled me, but indecent death. It was not the pulped head of the man that made me puke, but the indecency of the attitude.

Luckily I didn't have a great deal of time to think about all this, because the next day or two were very full. At about ten that evening we had another bombing attack, this time by a dozen Heinkel 111, with a couple of Me.109 thrown in. Again the Hun did us no damage, but by some amazing piece of luck he hit a French ammunition train that had been lying in John's goods-yard throughout the last week. There is some doubt as to whether it was the bombers who hit it or

whether, under cover of their bombardment, some spy had set it off. What is certain is that the trucks started to explode. There were twenty-seven coaches, and all were filled with unprimed 75 mm. shells. The racket started at about seven o'clock, and an occasional shell was still exploding at nine the next morning. All through the night the air was filled with shells and shell-cases, screaming, shrieking across the sky. I think I was never so scared. One shell came through the roof of my head-quarters and landed on my bed. Another hit the door of the building and slid across the room, hitting, and stopping at, the far wall. It was a lucky thing they weren't primed. Had they been, no man in "Charlie" company would have lived to see the morning.

I put all the spare men in my platoon down in the cellar of my H.Q.; then I walked round the area with my sergeant. The first two posts were in great heart, and seemed quite unshaken by the ghastly din. But in the third post a poor lad, of less than nineteen, had broken down. Yesterday had been hundred per cent. peace, to-day saw hundred per cent. war; no period of inoculation had separated these two phases, and the human nervous system is not built to withstand such a shock. The fellow was lying at the foot of his pit, sobbing his heart out. The rest of the section was completely undermined; so I took him out, meaning to bring him back with me to H.Q.; but he wouldn't go.

There was only one thing to do, and that was knock him out. I hadn't the heart to do it myself and ordered my sergeant to take a welt at his chin, while I stood behind to catch him. The sergeant brought across a hell of a right hook, just grazed the chin and cracked his fist into the wall at the side, breaking his knuckle. This woke the lad up, and he started to run, screaming, down the road. I dropped him with a kick on the shins, picked him up, panned him out, heaved him on to my shoulder and carried him down to the cellar. It was dark there, and I shouted for a light, to be greeted by roars of disapproval from one of my men, followed by frightened female squeaks. The light came, and there,

lying in a corner, bathed in the indecent brilliance of a match, lay my bloke in the arms of the lady of the pub, who had returned the day before. I immediately put out the light.

Who was to blame them? Hell was a-popping outside, the next day might see them dead, and there is so little joy to be had in waiting for it.

I hurriedly left the place and went over to see John. Dusk was on us, and the sky was aflame from the dump. John was nowhere to be seen; his sergeant told me that he had gone out an hour before with one soldier to rescue a Frenchman who was in the area of the dump.

John gone out into that hell: just the gallant, crazy sort of thing he would do! I set off very gingerly down the road towards the train to see if there was any sign of him. The road was littered with red-hot shells and shell-cases; the fronts of houses had collapsed into the street, and the air was filled with an agony of noise. I was just about to rat and get back to safety when a huge sheet of flame appeared about a hundred yards ahead. I dived into a doorway, and down the road, slowly and majestically, flew the chassis of a railway carriage. It was white-hot, and seemed to be about five feet off the ground. It crashed into a house twenty yards away and shattered the whole building. I was too stunned and scared to move. I just stood there shivering uncontrollably.

Suddenly I heard from across the street a short and unattractive word, spoken in the best of English. It brought me down to earth. I ran across the street praying hard, down a passage, and there was John. I burst into fits of laughter at the relief of it, though what he was doing would have been an excuse for mirth any day. He was trying to get a fat lady over a wall by means of a diminutive pair of steps. He heaved and cursed and sweated, and seeing me, shouted to me to "help me get this big fat bitch over this — wall; she's too plumb scared to go out into the street." We both gave a mighty heave and over she went with a crash, straight into a garden frame. John leapt over after her to

see if she was O.K. She was unhurt, but thanklessly greeted John with a stream of abuse that would have shamed a fish-porter from Marseilles. John came back and asked me to get her home while he fetched her old man.

I jumped over the wall and dragged and pushed her along, finally getting her to the R.A.P., where I left her in the hands of a fiery little stretcher-bearer corporal. I heard John's story later. When the train had first caught alight he had gone out to bring in a couple of outposts he had stationed near the scene; he had sent them back, but one had returned to say that a Frenchman had been hit and was lying in a field nearby. The two of them went on to look for him. Eventually, just as it was getting dark, they found him not fifty yards from the train. So much mess was flying around that they had to lie in the field with the old chap for about an hour. He couldn't walk: a shell-case had hit his thigh and smashed it to pulp. John told me the old fellow was as brave as a lion, and kept telling him not to bother but to leave him and go back to safety. At last there was a lull, and John and Coffin, the soldier, carried the old fellow between them till they found a wrecked pram. They sat him in this and pushed him along, every ten yards having to dodge into the nearest shelter when a particularly bright flash was seen from the dump. Half-way home, the old fellow told John that his wife was still in her house, and so John went off to get her out. It was here that I met him.

The next morning I went out with John to find Coffin's rifle that he'd dropped, and we walked over the field where he and the Frenchman had lain. I was flabbergasted by the sight of it. It was impossible to take one pace in any direction without treading on a shell-case or shell.

Just before we went out to look for the rifle, and as the last of the shells were popping off, John was seen walking around the company post talking to the men. He was wearing a battered old top hat and had a bright red parasol open above his head. Some people might think he was disgracing himself and the uniform he wore. Actually, by dint of

self-ridicule—John was a very proud person—he was giving back to the men a little of the confidence and sense of humour that they had lost through that night.

Later that morning, the two of us again went out to investigate a "face" that one of the troops had seen looking through a window at us. The face turned out to be that of a dirty little man who ran out on our arrival. We fired our pistols at him and gave chase, but he got away. We chased him a good mile in front of our line, and just as we were about to return a Hun reconnaissance Henschel flew over us at about fifty feet. I made at once for the nearest ditch, but John screamed at me to stop. I looked round, and there he was standing in the middle of the field, waving at the sod. The Hun circled round and the observer leaned out and waved back. "Thinks we're Germans or Fifth Column," said John. "Probably the former, which means there are some troops in the area." When the Henschel had flown off we raced back to order a stand-to. We had been expecting the Boche for days, and the aircraft gave away the fact that he was about.

Nothing happened for a couple of hours, and we went back to lunch. Suddenly there was a burst of fire from my left-hand section. I raced down to see what was happening, and was just in time to see a Hun motor-cycle combination go head-over-heels into the canal, with its crew of three, all dead. Another was turning in the road when a shot from our anti-tank rifle knocked the engine out and into the lap of the man sitting in the sidecar. The other two leapt off and ran into the wood, dragging their pal with them. A third vehicle stopped on the corner and got a machine-gun into action against us in double-quick time. A long burst of bullet hit the wall by my head, and I got down quick. Then came the shot of the century. It was our anti-tank man again. With one shot he hit the gunner and knocked his head clean off his shoulders: an A/T/R has the hell of a kick!

We could hear the undamaged Heines crashing about in

the wood, and we pushed in a long burst of Bren to tell them we were still feeling pretty good. On the road lay the smashed motor-cycle and the now deserted machine-gun. I shouted for a volunteer, and Barnes and Fox, two old soldiers with pretty grubby crime sheets and the hearts of lions, ran up. We hopped into a small boat and rowed across the canal. We had a quick look into the wood, but the Hun seemed to have fled. Fox then ran for the machine-gun, and I got some maps out of the motor-cycle and a couple of boxes of ammunition. We slashed open the tyres and then made great guns for the boat; we rowed back like hell with the booty, and just as we landed on our side, the Bren and A/T/R opened up again, and an answering stream of Heine stuff came back at us. We ducked and ran for cover. At the top of the road a tank appeared and blazed away at us; the bullets, at the rate of a thousand a minute, plopped, skidded and screamed at our feet. Stewart, behind the A/T/R, was shooting like a man possessed. Corporal Squire, the section commander, quite fearless, was standing in the open, shouting orders and controlling the fire of his section. The tank was far from happy, and reversed back into cover. All was quiet for a minute or so; then hell broke loose again.

Out from behind the corner came a large A/T gun being pushed along by the nose of the tank. The Hun gunner was sitting behind the shield, thus covered from small-arms fire. "My bastard," shouted Stewart. "You watch the — jump!"

He and the Hun fired simultaneously. The Hun brick smashed through our little emplacement, about an inch from Stewart and between Squire and myself. Stewart's bullet went through the shield of the gun, hit the Hun gunner and threw him, spread-eagled, on to the top of the tank. Bits of wall and masonry covered Stewart and blinded him from view. We pulled the muck off him, and he got a couple of shots into the tank as it was trying to retreat round the corner again. What shooting! He must have hit the driver through his vizor, I think, because the tank staggered back-

wards and stuck, bottom-down and belly-up, in the ditch behind.

Then it was our turn to play hell. We put twenty shots through the belly and into that tank, and it looked like a cullender by the time we'd finished. Then we had a wallop at the gun, splitting the barrel in half, smashing up the breech and wrecking the tyres. This was all too much for Heine; he didn't come back. We felt pretty pleased with ourselves: six men had dealt with double the number of Huns, had knocked out two and maybe three motor-cycle combinations, and written off a tank and a large gun, to say nothing of capturing a machine-gun and some maps.

Talking of the maps, I had forgotten about them. We now had a quick look at them, and there, nicely marked out for us, was the route to be taken by what must have been a Hun armoured division. I ran off with them to Peter and he rushed them to Battalion H.Q., which handed them direct to the gunners. A happy sequel came three hours later when we passed a regiment of French medium artillery, which we discovered was shooting off our map. This knowledge recompensed in a small way our hurt feelings when, half an hour after we had met up with and pashed the Hun, we received orders to withdraw, "in order to comply with the Allies' plan of defence."

I could have cried my eyes out. This had been the first real fight that we had had with the enemy, and we had driven him off. The men were in fine fettle, and crying out for more action, when this damned order had come through. Well, there was nothing for it but to pack up and get away. We moved out at about four that afternoon, and marched about six miles till we got to a little village on a cross-roads. Here we were to spend the night.

I saw Corporal Squire walking around looking worried, and I asked him what was the trouble. "A couple of silly sods have gone and got themselves left behind, sir—both my section." It was really my fault, not his, for not having made a proper check-up. I borrowed a motor-cycle and

went back to look for them. When I got into Pont-à-Vendin, the Hun had brought up some 5.9's and was shelling the place, and things weren't too comfortable. The village was deserted except for one French N.C.O., gallant fellow, and about four flat-out drunken Moroccans. I couldn't find our two men, but I discovered that when the black troops had seen us go they had got up and fled to a man, except for that one N.C.O. and the four drunks. I told the N.C.O. he had better buzz off too, and I made my way back to the battalion.

Just as I was passing the town of Carvin I saw a couple of Me.110's flying down the road towards me. Not wishing to try conclusions, I drove my bike at high speed towards some hayricks. Just before I got there, four French soldiers ran at me with fixed bayonets and drove me off, shouting that I would attract the machines on to them. Luckily the Me's didn't see me, or if they did, thought I was too small fry for them; and so, leaving my gallant allies, I rode off again.

It's a pretty bloody sensation, with enemy aircraft about, riding a solo bike along a deserted road. You can't hear the sods coming and you can't look out for them, or you'd probably drive your bike into a shell-hole or ditch. By the grace of God I saw the next party just in time. Carvin mines were a hundred yards to my right and there was a small wall just on the left of the road. Suddenly I had the sensation that I was being watched, and looking up I saw six Ju.87 dive-bombers fanning out to attack. I left that motor-cycle at 30 m.p.h. and cleared the wall in one. I flattened myself out, and then down the bastards came. I suppose in actual fact their target was the mines; I thought *I* was their target, and nothing they did in any way dispelled that feeling. Down, *Down*, DOWN they screamed, straight at *me*. About two hundred feet up they started to pull out, clearing the ground by not more than fifty feet. Big black lumps fell out from under their bellies, and these came straight for *me*. Tracer-bullets, like little flying glow-worms, came from their noses, and those came straight for *me*. As

the bastards swept over my head, I could actually see the pilot of one, his head strained back against gravity, eyes shut and mouth wide open, and he seemed to be laughing at *me*.

After the first attack, I noticed that I was in a German war cemetery, and the head-stones seemed to be waiting, waiting, waiting to receive *me*. *I—me—I—me—I*; everything was aimed *at I—at me—at I*. The bombs were crashing, yelling into the ground fifty yards away; huge holes appeared in the wall beside—*I—me*. As the planes came again, this time only with bullets, they yelled for *me* to *die—die—to die*. They wanted *me*—but they did not get me—I was too clever for them—much too clever—I won—yes, won—*Victory—I* had won!

I lay there for half an hour after they had left me. I felt like a man who has just had a perfect and shattering union with a woman. I sweated and wanted more. The earth seemed to shake and shudder under me, the trees seemed to be alive, the gently waving branches stroked me, and I wanted to sleep.

A lorry rolled and bucketed past, and I woke up. I walked slowly to my fallen bicycle and rode back to my unit. To see old faces again was good. I seemed to have been away a long time; I shook hands with Peter and said how pleased I was to see him, and he thought me a little mad. Perhaps I was.

That night, the Hun shelled us a lot, and I couldn't sleep. I went out for a walk with the S.O. and we saw a light flashing from a top window. We charged the house and caught a small boy with a lamp signalling to the Hun. We sent him and his family back to H.Q., and I got sick. I walked back to the company lines, lay down and again tried to sleep. Shells kept bursting overhead and I couldn't drop off. Suddenly, I put my tin hat over my belly, and then I slept.

The next morning found us on the march again, but not,

thank God, for long—though what there was of it was pretty hazardous. We were making for a little town called Fromelles; and on the way we passed an outpost company of French infantry. They suddenly opened fire with machine-guns on a party of refugees a thousand yards away, whom apparently they had mistaken for Huns. How many were killed before we were able to stop the fire I don't know, but I should imagine a good many, as the French are excellent machine-gunners. We used to hear them at night firing away with a precision of burst that was worthy of the best.

We had the unpleasant experience of being followed the whole march. A Henschel reconnaissance plane flew just out of range of us, probably waiting to see where we stopped. Eventually he made a mistake, got into the range of a French A.A. pom-pom and fell an easy victim.

We got into Fromelles in the late afternoon, and had just settled in when sixty bombers came at us at about 7,000 feet. The Henschel had done its work. Then the most incredible thing happened. The air was suddenly filled with little puffs of black smoke—ack-ack fire, heavy and extremely accurate. This was the first heavy ack-ack that we'd seen. What beautiful shooting, too! Every burst seemed to be just in front of the leading planes, blocking their passage. The leader faltered, jinked and, rolling slowly on to its back, started spinning down with black smoke pouring out of it. From the side appeared three little blobs which at once became men. A parachute opened behind one of the figures; but nothing appeared to arrest the fall of the other two. Down they came—and up to them, had they been listening, would have come the cheering of many men.

On seeing their leader fall, the whole sixty dropped their bombs, miles wide of the mark, turned and fled.

The two men hit the deck at about one hundred and twenty miles an hour, and we didn't know whether to scrape them off or just paint over them. The third fellow came down slowly, eventually to land bang in our midst. He was a Fifth Columnist. We hoiked him in and set about him;

but he was a brave type and kept his mouth shut, giving nothing away. He had on him a pass saying he was a French lunatic and so was of no military value to anyone—but the thorough Hun had forgotten to sign the thing!

Soon after this party, I was riding a motor-cycle, and at the same time trying to push a bicycle, down a shell-pocked road to the Armourer's stores, when a large staff car swung round the corner and knocked me into the ditch. I swore like hell and, mounting again, followed on down the road. As I passed Battalion H.Q. I noticed that the car was standing at the door and, seeing it was a Divisional Commander's brake, thanked my lucky stars that I hadn't sworn louder. Just as I shot past there was a shout and, looking round, I saw the General beckoning to me. I thought, "Christ, I'm in for it now," and raced over, wildly thinking up some excuse. As I got nearer I suddenly recognised the figure—it was my father. We've always been the greatest friends, and I was terribly pleased to see him. He told me that he had come over to get the battalion to counter-attack through the —th brigade, which had had the hell of a rough time.¹ I wasn't too happy about this, as it was made pretty clear to me that we would be pushing up against at least two Hun brigades. He was in a tearing hurry, and I only saw him long enough to say "Hello" and "Good-bye" before he disappeared in a cloud of dust.

We got our orders at about eleven o'clock that night, and they completely spoilt our night's rest. Try and sleep on the information that "We are attacking a very strong force of the enemy to-morrow at dawn, no tanks or aircraft in support, and only one battery of guns!" I lay down and did doze a bit in a troubled sort of way. At about one, the bombshell burst.

Peter rushed into my room, threw the bedclothes off me and kicked me out of bed. "C.O. wants you at once—hurry." Then he noticed that I was in pyjamas. "What

¹ This I later learned to be a well-founded rumour, but it was too late by then; we had done our worrying.

the bloody hell are you dressed like that for—don't you know there's a war on?" He spent five minutes telling me just why I mustn't wear pyjamas in the front line. Of course I agreed with him, but sleep's sleep, and I hadn't washed or taken off my clothes for a long time.

Anyhow, I said how sorry I was, broke all dressing records and ran. When I got there I found John, Freddy, the S.O. and Alec of the carriers waiting. They also had been summoned in the night. We walked in and saluted, and then I noticed I hadn't got a hat on and felt very stupid. Archie was there, looking very grim. I didn't feel so good either, and understood that something frightful had happened. The C.O. cleared his throat and, looking down at his desk, said: "Four days ago the first of the B.E.F. were evacuated from Dunkirk. Since then there has been a steady flow of ships taking our Army home. Last night we received news that the Germans have cut the road to the sea, so that we are completely surrounded. The Belgians, as some of you know, have packed in, and that means that the only port left to this Army is Dunkirk. The Brigadier has just given me orders to send six officers and six of the best N.C.O.s to Dunkirk to get home as best they can, so that there will be at least a few men who can take over commands in the battalions at home which in the near future will be landing in Southern France to get us out of this mess. I have chosen you six—that is, you five and Archie—and somehow you must break through to Dunkirk. You will leave in half an hour in two fifteen-cwt. lorries. That's all. Good luck."

The whole thing was so incredible that none of us could move. We just stood there looking dumb. Then Archie said, "Come on boys! Get a shift on! We mustn't miss the boat"—and we laughed and ran out.

Dunkirk, evacuation, defeat—not that, please God—not defeat, of course not. Only another withdrawal, on a different scale. Then we were lost to thought in the scramble of getting ready. We couldn't take any kit with us, but I

couldn't bear to leave my brand-new service dress behind. So new was it that I had worn it only once. My batman routed it out for me, and I raced back with it over my arm, my German machine-gun over my shoulder. Everyone was there but John. At last he appeared, strolling as usual, with a large suitcase, which he insisted on bringing. He was the only one among us who was really calm; the rest had suddenly become frightened. I don't think any of us had been really scared before, but here was something new. Instead of slogging away in an orderly withdrawal, and not understanding that we were withdrawing, we were now about to rush for our lives in high-speed trucks, leaving behind us the men we had fought with and, in the past three weeks, had come to love. I think a little panic almost set in.

After what seemed an age we set off, waving good-bye to the boys whom we never expected to see again. I was in the front truck with my machine-gun, but what use that would have been Lord alone knows, as I only had about a hundred rounds of ammunition left.

Through the night we raced, Archie directing with his map: through Armentières, Poperinghe, and at last to Dunkirk. The C.O. had blessedly been wrong. The Hun had *not* cut the road—the men at Calais had seen to that. We got jammed into a French lorried division just the other side of Armentières, and thought we would never get out alive, as a Hun spotting plane flew over with the dawn and swooped along the column. Half an hour later about a hundred bombers flew over and we thought it was curtains for us; but they were after bigger game—Dunkirk.

As we topped the Bagues ridge, we saw the famous port below us, bathed in flame and smoke. We raced down the hill and along the straight avenue that leads into the town. From ahead of us came the sound of heavy explosions, and as we approached the outskirts we saw what we had nearly missed. An ambulance convoy, with huge red crosses shining in the sun, had been bombed just two minutes before we arrived. Bodies lay all over the road, and from one

ambulance, which was a mass of flames, we could hear the screams of the wounded being burned to death.

There was nothing we could do to help, as many hands were already on the job, so we pressed on to Dunkirk. Here again we had just missed the hell of a bombardment. We dumped our trucks and walked down to the docks. We found a ship just moving off, and we leapt aboard.

The ship, an old Isle of Man Packet, was crowded with men from a Tank regiment, and odds and sods of Corps troops. The Tank boys had been through hell on earth, and they were of great heart and dead keen to get back again. The odds and sods had been through nothing, and were bloody.

As we sailed down the Channel, about 4,000 yards off-shore, the Hun opened up on us with French shore batteries which he had captured. We couldn't turn away as there was a mine-field to starboard of us. The shooting was pretty sketchy; only the boys on the port side could see the guns firing, and they were mostly Tank Corps. Then the ship got out of the mines, turned ninety degrees to starboard and showed the Huns her stern; she got her rudder knocked off for her trouble. This brought the guns in view of the odds and sods, who were mostly on the starboard side, and things started to happen. One fool of an officer panicked, screaming to everyone to get on to the port side. The men, already wetting themselves, lost all semblance of control. Luckily some Tank men were standing in the only two gangways, and they kept the rush back with pistol-butts. An army chaplain, a hell of a good type, leapt in and panned the ratty officer over the head with a leaded stick, which kept him quiet; and we were able, with the aid of a few welts here and there, to get things back to normal. The old tub slogged along, steering on its propellers, and the captain, a grand old chap, walked among the more restless men, cheering them up.

The S.O. and I had found ourselves a quiet corner on the boat-deck. We were sitting on our packs, talking, when we saw John on the deck below with what seemed to be a bottle.



16 A crashed Heinkel Bomber in a Belgian Field



17 Some of the few German Prisoners



18 Total War: bombed British Ambulances in Dunkirk

We left our kit and walked down to him ; but he had gone below decks, so we followed. We had got half-way down when the A.A. Lewis started to fire. "Probably mines," the S.O. had just said hopefully, when we heard shouting and running feet up topsides. We turned to see what was happening, but were shoved back by a mass of men scrambling down the companion way. Then hell broke loose in a big way. Later we heard that the cause was six Me.109s.

They machine-gunned the ship until they had no bullets or cannon-shell left. The noise from below was like that of pig-iron being cut by a circular saw. "Christ," said the S.O. "That was a spot of luck ! We're safe here unless they drop bombs."

"Are you, my foot !" said a voice. "That skylight's made of glass."

We looked up, and sure enough there was the sky looking down at us. Suddenly the glass was shattered by a burst and we all ducked ; but no one was hurt.

During brief moments of peace we could still hear the Lewis firing away, and we felt comforted. The men who fired it were heroes of the highest order. The gun was on the top deck and unprotected. The first man to fire had fallen dead, and his place had at once been taken by another sailor ; and so it went on, until four dead men lay at the feet of the fifth and wounded man who was still firing as the Boche flew away.

When the Hun had gone we raced up on deck. The sight that met us was not pleasant. By the gangway was a pile of bodies at least eight feet high. We pulled the dead away, got a couple or so wounded out and patched them up with first-aid field dressings—the only dressings that were available. A and B decks were littered with dead and dying men. The scuppers were inches deep in blood. We did what we could for them, but that was little enough. I patched up one fellow, a Tank corporal who had been an Army goalkeeper. His left foot was shot away, and he had sixteen machine-gun bullets in his chest and belly. He took

three hours to die, and never once complained, though he was conscious the whole time.

The wireless operator had been hit in the head, hand and back, and yet had gone on sending out S.O.S. messages. The captain had been wounded in the thigh, but had stayed on the bridge, and docked his ship three hours later.

About half an hour after this a destroyer came alongside and sent its doctor aboard ; but there was little he could do except give morphia. The Tank corporal refused morphia, saying he had a lot to talk about before he passed out. Just before we docked, an old Pioneer Corps man came up to John and said, "Excuse me, sir, if you're not too busy, could you bind up my leg?"—and pulling up his trouser, showed John a neat bullet-hole through the calf. John asked him why he hadn't had something done about it before. "I didn't want to bother you officers ; you were so busy looking after the blokes what had got hurt." He didn't seem to think his wound was important enough to require immediate attention, and that was two hours after he had received it.

At noon the quiet was again shattered by the squeal of the siren and the roar of aircraft. Christ ! not again, dear God ! But this time they were Spitfires—the first British aircraft most of us had seen since the 10th of May. And how we cheered them !

Almost before the sound of their engines had died away came a shout of "Land ahoy ! It's England ! It's the Cliffs of Dover !" Sure enough, out of the warm Channel haze, appeared the old chalk cliffs. God, it was good to see them again ! Even the Tank corporal was happy about it. He got a friend to lift him to the rail so that he could see England. "Looks pretty much the same, doesn't it ? But it's good to see it." Those were the last coherent words he spoke. He died in hellish agony ten minutes before we docked.

A few minutes before, the S.O. and I had gone to collect our kit from the boat-deck. We found it lying where we had left it. The Hun machine-gun had a bullet through the

stock, and the trousers of my service dress, the service dress which I had hardly worn but only carried so far, had at least a dozen bullet-holes through the right leg. The S.O.'s pack was also riddled. But for a lucky break we would have been sitting on those two packs. . . .

I remember nothing of the next half-hour. I was never conscious of the harbour or of disembarking. My next recollection is of being in a superbly comfortable railway carriage, with the S.O., John and Freddy, and of some sweet English girl giving us cups of tea and crying all over us. I went to sleep again. Then I remember the S.O. shaking me. "Do you remember this place, Andrew? Sandhurst."

I looked out, and sure enough we were at Blackwater Station. My people had a house near there, but this didn't occur to me. I just kept repeating to myself:

"Langdale, Frogmore, Blackwater, Hants
Went to bed in a little pair of pants."

"What the hell are you talking about?" asked the S.O.

"Oh, it's a rhyme about a house we've got here," I replied.

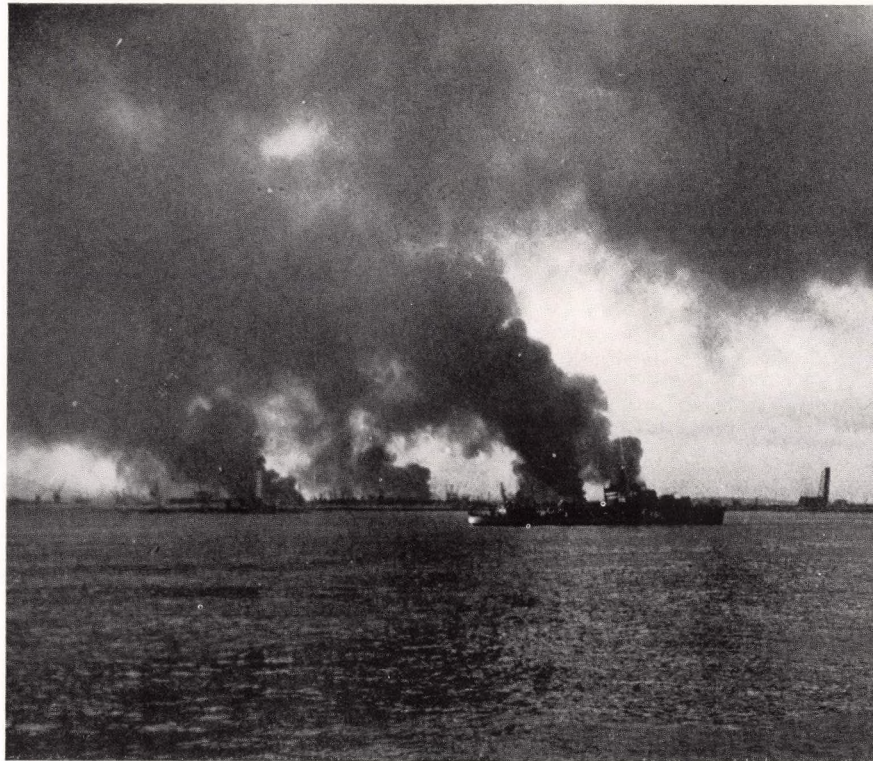
"Here," he almost screamed. Then it dawned on me. Without a word we just fell out of the carriage on to the platform and, with all our kit, stumbled on to the main London-Portsmouth road. We stopped the first car we saw and, I'm afraid without so much as a by-your-leave, told the driver to take us home. They were dear people, and quite forgave us for the invasion, in spite of the fact that we had not shaved for a week and both had machine-guns with us, and packs, and God knows what else. There were two old ladies in the back, and they hung on to the two guns, grimly and purposefully, like a couple of Jeanne d'Arcs.

The old gentleman driving insisted on taking us right up the drive, and there we tumbled out. My mother, hearing the racket, came to the top of the stairs, and seeing us, nearly passed out. Eggs and bacon were quickly brought to us and we staggered off to bed. I remember no more for twenty-four hours—I just slept.

Two days later, when I was getting back to normal, my father arrived home. The S.O. and I left and returned to the depot. From the depot we were sent up to the North of Scotland.

And so my first campaign ended. During my sleep the B.E.F. was evacuated almost to a man, and the battalion returned, covering itself with honour on the beach by conducting an R.S.M.'s drill parade and marching in threes into the boats, officers at the head of companies—drilling, so I have been told, with a precision worthy of Wellington Barracks.

We never returned to France as we had expected. Instead, we began preparing for invasion, a word that, until Dunkirk, had never entered the soldier's vocabulary.



19 Dunkirk, May 30th, 1940





20 Commando Officers receiving final orders



21 Raiding Craft

III

SUMMER, 1942

"Is it still blowing?" asks Jack.

Joel, our dynamiter, a big Scotsman, heaves himself out of his chair, lopes over to the door and looks out across the short garden to the sea.

"It is, but not so hard."

We sigh, and go on with what we were doing. There are seven of us in all, and for a week now we have been waiting in this room for the weather to be kind to us. The room is unfurnished except for seven chairs and a trestle table, on which stand seven large white mugs and seven tin plates, the remains of "tea." "Looks like the dining-room in 'Snow-white,'" says Pip—and everyone laughs, because there is nothing else to do.

For seven days now this room has been our prison, and we are all beginning to feel the strain a bit; for very obvious Security reasons, none of us has been allowed into the town. Just up the road stand two more houses—large ones. They are filled with our men, who are also "imprisoned" for the time being.

Joel gets up again and says: "Let's play darts, Andrew." There isn't a dart-board, but we have seven darts. It's a stupid game, but it amuses us. In the mess there is a very old orange. One of us rolls it across the floor while the other pots at it with the darts.

Five minutes of orange-potting is enough, so we both go into the garden to play with our lariats. Before the war, Joel ran a ranch in the Argentine. He can trip a running man at thirty feet; I can sometimes drop a noose over a standing man's head at twenty feet; but he is teaching me. A lariat's a useful thing for this Commando racket: not for catching Boches but for crossing rivers, climbing cliffs or getting over walls.

"Isn't it about supper time?" asks Jack at last. He is never too hungry.

"Only had tea an hour ago. I think you must have a visitor," says Pip, who has a nasty mind.

Joel goes off to the men's billet, saying that he must make a final check-up of the explosives. This must be the twentieth one he has made in the last two days. . . .

Jack fiddles with the wireless. A man is talking in a North Country accent:—

"What we want in t'factries is action; not the sort of action you get in t'Commandos, but mooch the same; only action behind the work bench—and that is what we are getting."

"Christ!" says Pip. "Action!"

Jack hastily switches over to dance music. Suddenly the telephone rings, and there is a rush to get there first. I win, and a voice says: "This is the S.A.Q.C.'s office. The gas will be turned off at 10.00 hours to-morrow till noon." We have the good sense to laugh.

"What's on to-night, Jack?" someone asks.

"Oh, the usual. Parade 22.30 hours down to the boats, practice our landing and all the demolition stuff, and then the withdrawal. The Navy's a bit worried about that last bit; yesterday we made a pretty good hash of it, so I want to get everything absolutely tickety-boo to-night. We'll go through the whole show as we hope to do it on the day, if this damn' weather will *give* us a day. You all know the password for to-night and the signals: the former is "Blonde Bombshell," the latter an "Ack" flashed by torch for recognition. Wireless, of course, will not be used except in emergency, and the same goes for Verey lights. For to-night the light will be green-red-green; on the day, of course, we'll use rockets and a different code, but these will do for now. How long do you reckon you'll take to finish your job, Andrew? Will half an hour be O.K.?"

"Suit fine, except if something goes very wrong, which I don't anticipate unless the Hun is particularly wide awake."

"Grand! Now, for to-night, remember, normal equipment and clothing. Don't let the men wear anything that might in any way show them to be Commandos. And Andrew, don't bring that bloody lasso of yours!"

Of course, we all know to a T what to do, but any excuse for talk is welcome. . . .

A knock comes at the door, and a short, cheerful man enters carrying knives, forks and plates on a "tray," which is the top of an ammunition-box.

"Cheers!" shouts Jack. "Food!"

We all buck up at the sight of food. The best thing about being bored is that the simplest things excite you—even bully-beef and mash.

We sit down to this plain, if plentiful, fare, and eat slowly to make the meal last as long as possible. Coffee follows, served in the same large, white mugs. Then we settle down to read—or try to. Some sleep.

After a while it is time to dress for the practice. We embuss, embark, land, withdraw, ride home and, tired out and well satisfied, flop into bed.

The next morning is spent in inspecting kit, going over maps, and having another final check of stores. We get back for lunch at twelve, though lunch is at one.

At half-past twelve the telephone rings. Another mad rush, and Jack grabs the instrument. We stand close to him, each man tense, hopeful, waiting. Suddenly Jack grins, "ups" a thumb and mouths "To-night." A cheer breaks the silence—not a "bronx" one, but an honest-to-God, happy one. We rush upstairs, shouting to our batmen to get our kit ready, fix our guns and fetch our fighting knives. Then we calm down; there's the whole afternoon and everything is ready, so there's really no hurry.

We go back to lunch—bully-beef and mash again. Joel appears with a double-edged weapon, about eighteen inches long, and sharpens it between mouthfuls of beef. I borrow his stone, and begin putting an edge to "Betsy," my little nine-inch dagger, hoping to God I never have to use it.

After all, shooting a Hun is not so bad, but knifing one means getting within smelling distance of his breath, and that must be hell.

At about three o'clock we collect our parties and begin showing them their tasks on a nameless map. I will never forget the men's joy when told that to-night is the night. They are grand chaps—not "trained killers," as some people seem to think, but men from many professions all over the world: an ethnologist from Kenya, a planter from Ceylon, a docker from Belfast, a fireman from Dublin, a hawker from Whitechapel, a theological student from Glasgow, in fact every type and breed, and all instilled with the will to fight, and a damn' clear idea of what they are fighting for.

They sit round the map and take in every word I say; I've never had a keener or a more intelligent audience. A question here and there, a grunt, or a laugh; they are happy, and so am I.

The confab over, everyone returns to his "prison" to await "zero hour." We are to be ready by six; by five every man is dressed, armed and waiting. At about five to six the telephone rings, but this time there is no rush to answer it. We look at one another anxiously. At length Joel gets up slowly and lifts the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!"

"What do you want?" asks Joel.

"Oh, is that you, George? I'm so sorry I missed you for lunch."

"You didn't miss me for lunch, my love," replies Joel, "and you've got the wrong number. Good night."

We laugh and go out to the men.

Down at the harbour the boats are waiting for us; stores and men are piled into them, and the O.K. is given to the Navy. One minute early we sail down the harbour and out to sea. Off to port lies England, very green, very white, very sunny. The little ships take station and, setting their

sharp noses for France, open up and push eagerly through the calm sea.

The men are uproariously gay, and seem to be making great friends with the crew; within the first hour one of them has scrounged tea from the tiny galley. The sun is still very hot, and there is not a cloud in the sky, which is a pity. Clouds hide bombers, clouds hide us. If we sight a Boche plane we will have to go home; we don't fancy a reception committee on the other side.

Slowly England fades into the distance, and I begin to think of the two other times I've left home since the war began—the mock hilarity of September, 1939, the bleak depression of August, 1940, when I sailed for Africa. Now I feel only an extraordinary happiness and confidence. I recall my two previous homecomings—Dunkirk: defeat, depression, relief; then my return from Africa, and my fear for the damage the Hun raids might have done. I feel that to-morrow England will be really pleased to see me, and I her; because I know I'm coming back.

It is getting darker, and the wind has stiffened a bit. Over to the east is a heavy bank of cloud which looks as if it might be overhead just when we want it to take the glare off the moon. I ask the skipper how long before we "darken ship"; he tells me half an hour, so Pete and I go below to the men and get them to start blacking their faces with burnt cork and cocoa powder. That done, they come on deck like a troupe of nigger minstrels and start chanting "Black Mammie" songs. They certainly look pretty damn' funny.

It is quite dark now, and we can only just see the wash of the ship ahead. I begin trying to frighten myself, and find myself thinking, "It's time you got scared, Andrew; it's time you got scared." Then I realise that there's no need to be scared, anyway. Fear is natural; we all know it, some more than others; but confidence can overcome fear, confidence can move mountains. I feel I can move twenty mountains to-night. . . .

Time's getting short; we should sight France soon. I

must go round the boys once more and see that everything's O.K. I wander round with Pete, and everything *is* O.K. We are running slowly now ; I can only see the other ships occasionally when a shaft of moonlight catches the white wash. There is a quiet hail from the bridge, and I go up to see what's wanted.

The skipper points over the port bow. "There it is, Andrew."

I follow the line of his arm and, sure enough, there it is. . . .

France—and I feel almost as if I were coming home.



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